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## The Work of Poverty

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# 2

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## Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo and New Orleans

Whatever is said is so far from the experience . . . If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable.

—Samuel Beckett

Why not Bouvard and Pécuchet in Somalia or Afghanistan?

—Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

### Godot Summoned by Crisis

Shakespeare's observation that "all the world's a stage" turns unremarkable and everyday reality into space of dramatic potential. The stage gives the world its shape, its value, and its possibility. Yet in what moments does the world begin to resemble Beckett's stage? When does the world perform *Waiting for Godot*? Beckett's work emerges in areas already designated as theaters: theaters of war, of covert operations, of surgery, of crisis. In these contexts the term "theater" designates something other than a building with lobbies, balconies, and curtains. These theaters are formed by circumscribing action and shutting it off from Shakespeare's world stage.<sup>2</sup> Enclosed, sparse, needful, and populated by two vagabond survivors, *Godot* provides the stage for these theaters.

The catastrophe of civil war summons *Godot*. In 1993, at the height of the Bosnian crisis and amidst the violence of ethnic cleansing, Susan Sontag rehearses *Godot* in a partially destroyed theater in Sarajevo. Having "come to care intensely about the battered city and what it stands for," Son-

tag stages the play as a gesture of solidarity with those living under siege, calling attention to the city's state of crisis.<sup>3</sup> Once a multiethnic, tolerant metropolis of "serious culture," which Sontag defines as an "expression of human dignity,"<sup>4</sup> Sarajevo becomes a city scarred by genocide, shelling, and sniper fire. A play about waiting vagabonds casts light upon the political world order's failure to intervene in Sarajevo's abrupt turn from civilization to barbarism.

*Godot* is staged again in New Orleans by New York-based artist Paul Chan in the aftermath of the combined natural and man-made disaster of Hurricane Katrina. With assistance from the Classical Theatre of Harlem, which had just closed a Katrina-inspired production of *Godot* featuring a flooded stage, Chan stages Beckett's play in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly, poor sections of New Orleans where the disaster is brutally apparent. The homeless state of Beckett's vagabonds in Chan's production resonates with the unremitting sense of displacement for the population of New Orleans caused by the official evacuation of many of its people to other states (without their subsequent return), the loss of habitable structures, the insufficiency of trailers provided by FEMA, the conversion of the city's inhabitants into refugees, and the memory of its unrecovered dead. Chan's play explores waiting in the continued chaos of disaster along class and race lines.

*Godot* seems ill suited to bear an agenda. Its reticence about the availability of its meaning to historical, political, or aesthetic interpretation is matched only by the reticence of its author. Existentialism provides the foundation for much of Beckett criticism: it seized the paucity staged by this writer's work to talk about man without faith or god, about ontology and existence. The existentialist, humanist, and new critical angles on Beckett inevitably shear off, one by one, the possible relevancies that can be derived from Beckett's text. Martin Esslin's claim that "no universal lessons, no meanings, no philosophical truths could possibly be derived from the work of a writer like Beckett" is typical.<sup>5</sup> The ironic byproduct of Beckett's theater of insufficiency is that critics make Beckett's work a self-sufficient experience for the viewer. According to David Bradby, *Godot's* disturbance to referential functioning makes rethematization or transformation of the play impossible: "[*Godot*] does not imitate an action (in Aristotle's term); it does not even tell a complete story. There is thus little or no scope for relocating the story or setting the characters in a different environment, as, for example, Richard III may be relocated to the period between the two world wars."<sup>6</sup> Bradby claims that recoding Shakespeare's

historical drama is possible because his play strives for likeness. By contrast, Beckett's nonmimetic art furnishes no representation to either warp or recontextualize. As proof, Bradby cites Beckett's remark about the work of James Joyce: "His writing is not *about* something, *it is that something itself.*"<sup>7</sup> Bradby isolates Beckett's work by equating it with an ontological state rather than the representation of one. This tendency culminates in critical works that suggest the audience should relate to *Godot* intuitively, as if to that which bears no message: music. Jonathan Kalb, for one, concedes that historical readings are possible, though he claims they interrupt our aesthetic experience of Beckett's work. "Searching for social and political allegories," he writes, "lead[s] viewers away from present-time experience, away from perceiving the play as music, and toward the refuge of older and more distanced viewing patterns."<sup>8</sup>

But even music is not necessarily a pure aesthetic object. Sontag's protest production was conceived, rehearsed, and performed in the harsh climate of the Siege of Sarajevo. It calls to mind Karl Eliasburg's astonishing performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony performed in the summer of 1942 by a ragtag group of musicians before a starving audience in the midst of the Siege of Leningrad. Broadcast over the lines to the German forces, this performance shows how music can have a rapport with crisis and may in fact help decide the outcome of that crisis. In his essay on *Endgame*, Theodor Adorno reworks the musical model by which critics have strictly underscored Beckett's aesthetic autonomy: "In the act of omission, what is left out survives as something that is avoided, the way consonance survives in atonal harmony."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Beckett becomes a witness to postwar experience by means of its explicit negation in his work.<sup>10</sup> Adorno claims, "It would be ridiculous to put Beckett on the stand as a star political witness."<sup>11</sup> Yet this is followed by a curious addendum about Beckett's work: "The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence."<sup>12</sup> Adorno first undercuts Beckett's suitability to stand as a witness: his name is not to be called. He then insists that if Beckett is called after all, he bears witness neither by speaking nor by remaining silent, but through a combination of both.

Critics aside, there is some evidence that Beckett himself discourages the engagement of history and politics with his work, and encourages a more hermetic critical and directorial approach. In Beckett's translation of *Godot* into English, for example, he removes the names Roussillon and Bonnelly, which provide context and situate the play historically.<sup>13</sup> Specifically these names bind the text to Beckett's own biography. They refer to the area

in the south of France and the farmer with whom Beckett and his future wife, Suzanne, stayed while pursuing Resistance activities during World War II. Beckett eliminates the names Roussillon, Bonnelly, and Suzanne in a novel way. He replaces them with a snapping of fingers, making them vanish into Vladimir's amnesia: "But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called . . . (*he snaps his fingers*) . . . can't think of the name of the man, at a place called . . . (*snaps his fingers*) . . . can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember?"<sup>14</sup> The physical inertia on Beckett's stage becomes emblematic of a work where memory cannot be jogged.

How, then, in the face of this kind of evidence (or lack of it) can *Godot* be called to testify for historical crisis? Do Sarajevo and New Orleans offer conditions that are suitably absurd or "ridiculous," as Adorno claims, to call Beckett to the witness stand? As witness in these settings, does *Godot* offer only silence? The play clearly does not appeal through any therapeutic directive. Its only slogan is its first line: "nothing to be done." From there it advances only to break God's failure down into smaller degenerative disorders. Lucky hails "divine apathia, divine athambia, divine aphasia" (divine apathy, imperturbability, and muteness).<sup>15</sup> The abandonment of man by God is a theme that courses throughout philosophy. Martin Heidegger's essay "What Are Poets For?" describes a turning away not only from man by god, but from god by man.<sup>16</sup> Heidegger's essay even reads at times as a *Godot* explained to philosophers: "The era is defined by the god's failure to arrive."<sup>17</sup> Like Beckett, Heidegger discerns this abandonment as a condition of destitution and ever-growing need: "At this night's midnight, the destitution of the time is greatest. Then the destitute time is no longer able even to experience its condition. That inability, by which even the destitution of the destitute state is obscured, is the time's absolutely destitute character. The destitution is wholly obscured, in that it now appears as nothing more than the need that wants to be met."<sup>18</sup> *Godot* emerges within landscapes of crisis, however, because of its dissimilarity to these concepts. Ultimately, Heidegger is concerned with spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic issues. Beckett's play conveys a curiously practical concern about the obstinacy of need: "curiously practical" because in conventional theater settings Beckett's reduced forms strike us as the apex of theatrical experimentation. Within the context of war-torn Sarajevo and post-Katrina New Orleans, these same reduced means strike survivors as the provisional terms of their existence. *Godot* renders poverty not as concept but as condition. Within the "Sottisier" notebook in the Beckett Archive, held at Reading Univer-

sity, we find what might be the closest thing to a Beckettian motto: "Penury is all."<sup>19</sup> The fact that this line remains in Beckett's notebook suggests it does not belong on his stage. Beckett's work appeals to people in situations of need because it refuses to generalize their condition or convert it into a moral (as "penury is all" does). Beckett furnishes no philosophy to the audience. Likewise, Lucky enumerates the symptoms of divine failure. Compared to the dramatic turn away by Heidegger's god, Lucky's etiology is at once more particular and more radiant. As Beckett describes it, "It concerns a God who turns himself in all directions at the same time."<sup>20</sup>

Replacing names and history with a snapping of fingers does not completely eliminate what is historical from the play. Taking Beckett's removal of Roussillon and Bonnelly less as an elimination of the historical than its odd displacement into the gestural helps us think about what role history and politics may have within the confines of the play itself. In other words, Vladimir's inability to remember the name of the historical place does not eliminate history from the play so much as personalize it. The audience is invited to supply the missing relationship, to remember where they might have been prior to the predicament that immerses them. For Vladimir, that memory is of picking grapes: for the survivor of the siege or flood, even the smallest memory of place might retain this utopic or Edenic flavor.

This personalization in the moments of silence in Beckett's text may help us account for the strange solace that besieged audiences take from Beckett's vagabonds. An affinity between Sarajevo and *Godot* can be heard faintly in the following description of the city by Juan Goytisolo:

In this city where there is no wood to make coffins, you must get used to sleeping, moving, walking about fully aware of your defenseless, precarious existence. Nobody can guarantee that a crack marksman hasn't chanced to get your insignificant self in his sights or that a grenade or shell won't explode inside your room. The inhabitants of Sarajevo have withstood for more than a year this risk of extermination, their life as inmates of an open prison, with integrity, dignity, and sangfroid. But the combined effect of hunger, exhaustion, and a general feeling of betrayal and abandonment has finally overtaken them from the day the shameful Washington accord was signed, forcing their moral resistance to the limit of what is bearable.<sup>21</sup>

History conspires to turn the description of a city under siege into a synopsis of Beckett's play. Abandonment, hunger, the limit of the bearable, life

without assurance: uncannily these are the fundamental terms for any analysis of *Godot*. It suggests that Sarajevo had become a living paraphrase for the play Sontag brings to the city. Most notably, Guytisoló mentions how inhabitants live “as inmates of an open prison.” Sarajevo prepares its residents in the labor of useless waiting they see on Beckett’s stage in the same way, as we have seen, San Quentin prepares Cluchey, Bandman, Lembke, and the other convicts. As with the inmates, it is not a question of what the Sarajevans see in the play but of how they experience a feeling of affirmation because the play sees (understands, anticipates) the audience. For Erika Munk, a theater critic who attends Sontag’s production, the audience becomes an emotional viaduct connecting the play to the situation of its performance: “The *Waiting for Godot* directed by Susan Sontag in Sarajevo is impossible to think about, on some deep level doesn’t exist, outside its immediate situation. The war’s emotional consequences—fear, hopelessness, gallows wit, grief, defiance—permeated every moment and affected everyone involved, and the siege’s practical effects dictated rehearsal conditions, lighting, sound, seating, performance times, and the physical space.”<sup>22</sup> Under what conditions might Beckett’s play provide not just an immediate reaction but only an immediate reaction? When might the *unmemorable* nature of a performance be a tribute to its power? While *Godot* dismays, perplexes, or invites appreciation from the audiences in the Old Vic, Lincoln Center, and the Babylon Theater, its performance in Sarajevo offers no residue for thought or memory. The experience of *Godot* expires in a transient emotive state, which afterward cannot rise into consciousness (let alone discourse). The catharsis is the work of a double performance: the war acts on the audience as much as Beckett’s play. Munk’s discussion does not make clear which way the audience is facing: toward the ruined city or toward the stage. The war’s “emotional consequences—fear, hopelessness” are the themes of Beckett’s play. In the Sarajevo performance, these “themes” lose their obstinate form, their articulation becomes frailer, and they become recognizable to the audience.

Beckett’s stage exposes something to audiences who are already waiting, and the play emerges for them as a reading of their predicament. In the epigraph to this chapter, Beckett says that when you really get down to the catastrophe—the humble directionality of Beckett’s approach is important here—the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable. Beckett may appeal to survivors by his very slightness (Beckett’s signature minimum) of eloquence. Something like a stammer, rather than literary or political eloquence (speaking crafted for public effect), is needed in a catastrophe. This

stammer is evident throughout the text of the play. Vladimir and Estragon frequently speak to one another as if locked in a game of hand over hand, having breath for no more than a few words at a time. This is how they diagnose the condition of Lucky, tethered with a rope:

VLADIMIR. A running sore!  
 ESTRAGON. It's the rope.  
 VLADIMIR. It's the rubbing.  
 ESTRAGON. It's inevitable.  
 VLADIMIR. It's the knot.  
 ESTRAGON. It's the chafing. [ . . . ] Look at the slobber.  
 VLADIMIR. It's inevitable.  
 ESTRAGON. Look at the slaver.  
 VLADIMIR. Perhaps he's a halfwit.  
 ESTRAGON. A cretin.  
 VLADIMIR. (*looking closer*). Looks like goiter.  
 ESTRAGON. (*ditto*). It's not certain.<sup>23</sup>

There is no steady progress through diagnosis here, just the heaping of statements that slightly mutate from one to the next. Instead of the conclusive authority of a second opinion, doctors Vladimir and Estragon offer only the slightly different, slightly redundant superaddition of an nth opinion. They set the tone for a play in which language doesn't entirely *take*. The twilight sky of *Godot* both inspires Pozzo's exaggerated monologue ("What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky?") and obstructs Vladimir's effort to describe it to his blind interlocutor:

POZZO. (*anguished*) Is it evening?  
 VLADIMIR. Anyway it hasn't moved.<sup>24</sup>

Beckett's play embodies waiting and a future that never arrives rather than a prescience. It thereby taps into a survivor mentality of weariness and futility mixed with inexplicable, unjustified persistence. The badges of despair and futility have been pinned firmly to Beckett's work, as they have been to Kafka's. The crucial difference between the two, and the reason why nobody volunteered to read *Das Schloß* aloud to the people of Sarajevo, is that Beckett's work does not try to foresee our despair. *Godot* forecasts nothing because it never hints that things can change. In *Godot*, even the weather is stuck.

## Precursor to Sarajevo and New Orleans: *Godot* in McComb, Mississippi

*Waiting for Godot* appears in environments of need before Chan and Sontag. As part of the civil rights movement, the Free Southern Theater takes the play through thirty towns in the rural South. They perform for predominantly African American audiences in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Georgia before completing their tour in New York.<sup>25</sup> *Godot* is adapted to the agrarian clock: performances are scheduled for late afternoon so the audience can get home. Many of the spectators apparently have never seen a play before. Reports of the performances indicate that their fascination with the theater begins with the fact that “it wasn’t a ‘meeting,’ and it wasn’t a movie; it was something else. Someone opened the window.”<sup>26</sup> Beckett’s play opens the window to a different type of gathering combining the personal urgency of the town meeting with the distraction of cinema.

Critics doubted the relevance of *Godot* to rural audiences. Part of this is an assumed incapacity of rural audiences to “understand” a play that remains opaque to people thoroughly familiar with theater as spectacle. Actor and director John O’Neal writes that the *Godot* productions in Mississippi “irritated the hell out of people. Time and time again, the question was raised, ‘What possible relevance do you imagine *Godot* to have to the lives of Black people in the South?’”<sup>27</sup> The irritated people are not in the audience, but are those who estimate the audience and have already arrived at a verdict on *Godot*. Their irritation implies Beckett’s play is a refined work of culture beyond the grasp of country bumpkins: What is a line like “there’s no lack of void” to these spectators, and they to it?<sup>28</sup> Is *Godot* accessible only through one’s education, through research, or through criticism?<sup>29</sup> Should one audience of *Godot* presume to claim ownership over the play’s relevance?<sup>30</sup> A spectator to the performances of the Free Southern Theater offers a rejoinder to these skeptics: “If theater means anything anywhere, it certainly ought to mean something here!”<sup>31</sup> This urgent exclamation is closer to the heart of Beckett’s play: meaning is hypothetical and yet necessary, rooted in the place. The meaning of theater is not guaranteed. Though it may not exist, it might just have a chance in McComb.

The varied and extreme circumstances of *Godot* performances provide an indication not of the capacity of an audience to appreciate the play, but of the necessity of an audience to create its relevance. Relevance is more intimate than meaning, as it pertains to the way a work addresses us and how we situate ourselves before it. Can the relevance of *Godot* or any play ever be calculated?<sup>32</sup> *Godot* poses the question of relevance to the audience

by removing the stable psychological reference points, welcoming chance into the audience's confrontation with it. Without these reference points the spectator (in the Babylon Theater in Paris as in McComb's town hall) must work with and against the play to discern how it happens. "Finding" the play relevant only signals the discovery of this process—something the audience makes rather than something foreordained by the play. This is the reason why Beckett's play persistently is interesting to people who have never seen theater, audiences unimpeded by either a preimagining of its relevance or an overexpectation of its uses for them. Richard Schechner observes, "The New York audience looked for meanings; they saw the play in the context of a hundred critics. In New Orleans and McComb they looked at Beckett's play—right in the face—and they laughed at the characters."<sup>33</sup>

The Free Southern Theater, part of the Black Arts Movement, enlists *Godot* not for the purpose of educating its audience, not to impart a lesson, but rather simply as an encounter. Noting how one man in the audience mumbled something toward the actors after the show, "slave . . . whipped him. . . no! . . ." O'Neal observes, "He felt something, but he couldn't get the words to say it. That's our job: to help this man find the vocabulary to say what he wants to say."<sup>34</sup>

The tour of Free Southern Theater's *Godot* sheds light on the way in which the play deceptively invites audiences to relate to it through their circumstances, who they are and where they happen to be. The performers suggest how audiences in New York engage the play differently from those in the rural South. Richard Schechner notes that "New York is a rich enough city for despair to become an occupation."<sup>35</sup> Despair is not a hobby for the New York spectator: it is a calling. By contrast, he notes, "The McComb audience doesn't have the kind of despair which depends upon the separation of thought and act. *Godot* was really a comedy in New Orleans and Mississippi. They laughed at Lucky; in New York they were embarrassed by a Negro at the end of a white man's rope."<sup>36</sup>

What happens to Beckett's play when its existentialism goes unnoticed by the audience? The despair of rural audiences pertains to other aspects of their lives, perhaps to the limitations imposed on the life of a sharecropper. But they do not invest in the despair emerging from the "separation of thought and act." Existentialism does not intercept their understanding of the play. Consequently, they magnify the actors' incapacity to move as a clownish game, not as the demonstration of a concept. Ironically, this audience's refusal of this type of despair allows *Godot* to become a play for the activist cause. Schechner reports, "'We're *not* waiting!' they said, during

and after the play."<sup>37</sup> This connects the despair of the audience to something other than a philosophy of despair (despair as occupation or as hobby). The spectators in Mississippi therefore react to *Godot* in a highly relevant but critically unconventional way: they see it as an injunction to act.

## Sontag and the Usefulness of Theater

Sontag's performance of *Waiting for Godot* is born of a desire to make herself useful to the cause of a battered city. In April 1993, when Sontag visits her journalist son covering the genocidal war in Sarajevo, then in Yugoslavia, she arrives in a city under persistent attack from artillery and snipers positioned in the surrounding hills. "Without water, gas, electricity, public transport, or telephones," observes Goytisolo, "Sarajevo looks at first sight like a phantom city, a dislocated skeleton or a lifeless corpse. But the intermittent crackle of machine-gun fire, the occasional blast of mortars, the whistle of snipers' bullets opportunely remind the visitor that its torture continues."<sup>38</sup> Sontag explains a need to take action: "I don't want to be a tourist—it's not, for me, enough to make a symbolic visit."<sup>39</sup> She expresses an idea to direct a play to Haris Pašović, a director who oversees wartime productions of Euripides's *Alcestis* and Sophocles's *Ajax*. When he replies, "What play?" Sontag notes, "Bravado suggested to me in an instant what I might not have seen had I taken longer to reflect: there was one obvious play for me to direct. Beckett's play, written over forty years ago, seems written for, and about, Sarajevo."<sup>40</sup> As Sontag admits, this is a radical, even if unthinking, proposal.

What makes *Godot* the "obvious" choice for Sontag? For her the play is not esoteric but illustrative, "so apt an illustration of the feelings of Sarajevans now—bereft, hungry, dejected, waiting for an arbitrary, alien power to save them or take them under its protection."<sup>41</sup> It may also be obvious because of the monologue in the second act that pierces the haze of inaction on stage. Vladimir's speech is about the call to conscience, about responding to another's need: "To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late."<sup>42</sup> Vladimir defines mankind as those who hear the appeal for help. The cries ring in everyone's ears like a general alert, but "mankind" discerns how these address us, according to the place and time in which we happen to be. "Nobody can plead ignorance," writes Sontag, "of the atroci-

ties that have taken place in Bosnia since the war started in April 1992."<sup>43</sup> Sontag claims the failure is not of knowledge but of response, the very topic of Vladimir's speech. "Why so little response to what happened in Bosnia?"<sup>44</sup> In her mission in Sarajevo, Sontag may have been emboldened by the powerful contraction in Vladimir's monologue: "all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." Only responding makes us human and it may not be our choice.

From Vladimir's speech Sontag borrows the notion of an address that marks its audience. She applies this in her claim that *Godot* was written "for and about Sarajevo." This transposition ignores the way *Godot* is not "for" audiences at all, let alone about particular audiences. Rather than being addressed to audiences, Beckett's work is abandoned to them. Beckett develops an aesthetic suitable to the indigence of the figures that populate his world. Though a few of Beckett's stories begin with a literal eviction notice, his whole oeuvre bears the stamp of one. One of his characters brings the vagabond moment back even further: "I gave up before birth."<sup>45</sup> If Kafka's work embraces primordial guilt, Beckett's embraces pre-natal dispossession. Giving up predates having something to give up, or something on which to give up. Abandonment happens without prior ownership. His work does not welcome the model of reciprocity, of giving and taking, between a work and its audience. The last lines of Beckett's late play *What Where* indicate that it intends no transfer of sense to the reader. They instead issue a conflicting mixture of specific demand and open invitation: "Time passes. That is all. *Make sense who may.* I switch off."<sup>46</sup>

What is the public utility of theater? Sontag claims that the play is "about and for Sarajevo" because she envisions it as useful to the Sarajevans in their plight. She discusses directing in relationship to plumbing: "I was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct a play would make me useful in the way I could be if I were a doctor or a water systems engineer. It would be a small contribution."<sup>47</sup> Brushing aside suggestions made by journalists that the Sarajevans would rather have escapist entertainment for their suffering, Sontag writes, "In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art."<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, Sontag's argument for the utility of staging *Godot* is that the threatened condition of the vagabonds on Beckett's stage will evoke reflection upon the reality of the Sarajevans facing comparable threats. The utility of the play is also practical in nature: she gives a maximum number of unemployed actors in Sarajevo a chance to perform by turning Vladimir

and Estragon into three couples. On this count she says the play becomes a microcosm of prewar life. The production “means so much to the local theatre professionals in Sarajevo because it allows them to be normal, that is, to do what they did before the war; to be not just haulers of water or passive recipients of humanitarian aid.”<sup>49</sup>

Sontag defends the usefulness of performing Beckett in Sarajevo against the journalists who doubt her project. Much as the Free Southern Theater’s staging of *Godot* in McComb, Mississippi, had been questioned, so too is the performance in Sarajevo: “Why theater, in the middle of a war and a genocide?”<sup>50</sup> “Isn’t putting on a play like fiddling while Rome burns?”<sup>51</sup> and “Why not *Bouvard and Pécuchet* in Somalia or Afghanistan?”<sup>52</sup> By implying that war and genocide should go on uninterrupted by even the slightest impertinence, such questions implicitly cast their vote for the aggressor.<sup>53</sup> The query “Why theater?” never arises when Beckett’s play is performed at Carnegie Hall. Where it is sanctioned by wealth and protected by convention, culture’s uselessness elicits no questioning. Emerging in the midst of crisis, however, theater is suddenly called upon to account for its existence. *Godot* is an interesting artifact to put against this wall. The play offers neither an evident gesture of protest nor a wholesome lesson. It provides the opposite of an enriching experience. Performing *Godot* seems indeed very close to fiddling, but with a reservation. *Godot* does not accompany, like a soundtrack, the burning of Sarajevo. Closer to contrapuntal fiddling, this play breaks up the secondary meanings of music as war’s accompaniment: to go with war, to vouchsafe for it, to supplement it, to befriend it. Jean Baudrillard attempts to rhetorically dramatize Beckett’s uselessness by facetiously suggesting that Sontag bring Flaubert’s novel (*Bouvard and Pécuchet*) to other settings of crisis. What if we were to honor Baudrillard’s hyperbole? What *would* Flaubert’s novel about two failures, engineers of countless futilities who clearly prefigure Vladimir and Estragon, sound like in a square in Mogadishu? By proposing for Sontag a work that is consumed in solitude, Baudrillard indicates that he misses the point of both performing a play and performing Beckett’s play in particular. *Godot* begins by announcing that nothing is to be done. What it performs is all that must be undone, a diligently negative labor. It undoes the questions through which we coercively ferret out the practical value of the artwork. It requires us to rethink the use value of theater. *Godot* achieves this not by asserting its utility but by belaboring, even tiring out, all the variations on this question of “Why?”

## *Aquilex*: Reading Beckett's (F)utility

One of the first casualties of the war in Sarajevo was the water and sewer system. Sontag locates Beckett's usefulness in relation to these public utilities. She says that as a director she does not have the same obvious usefulness to the city as a water systems engineer, yet she also says she produces something that treats the people of Sarajevo as "more than just haulers of water."<sup>54</sup> Comparing engineering, with its obvious necessity and applicability, to theater begs the question: What is the value of theater and how is that value measured? Furthermore, how is that value different in an impoverished landscape—or a landscape of poverty?

Beckett himself offers a way to think about the relationship between theater and water hauling. Specifically in an early essay on Joyce, he traces the author's debt to the work of Dante, Bruno, and Giambattista Vico. Beckett connects Joyce's fiction to the evolution of language described in the *Scienza Nuova*. Paraphrasing Vico, Beckett says the oldest poetry must be regarded "not as sophisticated confectionery" but as "evidence of a poverty-stricken vocabulary and of a disability to achieve abstraction."<sup>55</sup> The evolution of language into "a highly civilized vehicle, rich in abstract and technical terms, was as little fortuitous as the evolution of society itself."<sup>56</sup> Beckett says that Joyce's writing more closely resembles the materiality of the "poverty-stricken" vocabulary, in which content and form are entwined, than it does a "civilized vehicle," in which language functions as the neutral bearer of abstraction.<sup>57</sup>

Beckett's emphasis on the poverty and disability of language (over its "richness") anticipates *Godot*. It also tells us how to read Vladimir's gesture of snapping fingers as a substitute in the English translation of the play for specific places in France. As an example of the evolution of language out of its "dumb form" (gesture) Beckett discusses the etymology of the Latin word *lex*.

1. Lex = Crop of acorns.
2. Ilex = Tree that produces acorns.
3. Legere = To gather.
4. Aquilex = He that gathers the waters.
5. Lex = Gathering together of peoples, public assembly.
6. Lex = Law.
7. Legere = To gather together letters into a word, to read.<sup>58</sup>

I propose that *aquilex*, the fourth word in the etymology, provides us with a trope for understanding the utility of theater and offers a figure for reading Beckett. If Joyce's work rescues the hieroglyphic function of early sign systems, Beckett's oeuvre compels reading that activates the full declension of *legere*. Beckett's destitute work blocks reading defined as an abstract accumulation.

Grazing on the failure of anything to happen, the characters in *Godot* furnish little for us to inventory or synopsise. There is little by way of flora and fauna for us to glean. What we can gather is gathered like water. Like the figure of an *aquilex*, we sense how the term "gathering" already overstates our role. Reading Beckett, as the successful productions in Sarajevo, New Orleans, and prisons show, requires none of the expertise of the mushroom gatherer who must discern edible from poisonous. There is no expertise needed in the gathering of water. H. Porter Abbott uses the term "arbitrary winnowing" to describe the scattered and paratactic narration of Beckett's "From an Abandoned Work."<sup>59</sup> Winnowing, however, separates what is worth keeping from what should be discarded. It is a gesture of discrimination, whereas water gathering is a gesture of both need and futility. We know it to be impossible to capture a moving source. Water flows together but is not something that can be gathered like acorns. The impropriety of the term is relevant to the "gathering" that we try to do while reading Beckett.

The subadequate quantity of sense makes Beckett's work elusive. There is no rushing force, no dramatic dynamism. *Godot* abounds in moments we call negligible or impoverished only because they do not hang around long enough for us to take note. For example, Vladimir picks up the "thinking hat" that Lucky leaves on the stage and asks, "How does it fit me?" To this Estragon replies, "How would I know?"<sup>60</sup> The question of how he looks precipitates an epistemological crisis. Only after the conversation moves on do we belatedly register the difference between Vladimir's understanding of *fit* (Does it suit me?) and Estragon's (How tight is the hat?).<sup>61</sup> Such tears in the fabric of meaning—so small that they ask to go unaccounted for—propel the characters' dialogues. Sense, abandoned as soon as the vagabonds gather it, slips like water through our fingers.

That Beckett's work frustrates the reader's tight grasp over it is evidenced by an anecdote told by his friend, Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran. Cioran meets with Beckett one evening and announces that he will not go to bed until he thinks up a French translation for the title of Beckett's short story "Lessness." Together they consider the gamut of forms sug-

gested by *moins* and *moindre*, but “none of them seemed to us to come near the inexhaustible *lessness*, a blend of loss and infinitude, an emptiness synonymous with apotheosis.”<sup>62</sup> Trying to align Beckett’s elusive term with a counterpart in French continues to gnaw at Cioran even after they part for the evening. He stays awake into the night, counting not sheep but derivations of the Latin *sine*, and goes to sleep only after settling on *sinéité*. Possibly because the term suggests a condition of being without, rather than being less, Cioran and Beckett decide to give up the search and settle on *Sans*. They conclude that “there was no noun in French capable of expressing absence in itself, pure unadulterated absence, and that we had to resign ourselves to the metaphysical poverty of a preposition.”<sup>63</sup> Is this metaphysical poverty a resignation or an achievement? Beckett’s poverty baffles the resources of language such that it requires the translator to mix the parts of speech. In clutching at a preposition in order to translate a noun, Cioran reveals some of the impropriety of speech contained in the term *aquilex*.

Whereas Sontag says *Godot* will address the audience as “more than just haulers of water or passive recipients of humanitarian aid,” Beckett’s work is careful not to have the reader exceed (either in value or cultural prestige) the water hauler. Beckett’s work resituates the reader’s activity around earlier gestural forms of gathering. In Sarajevo the audience is literally one of water haulers, despite Sontag’s desire to have the play annul that status. The Sarajevans themselves speak of the difference between New York and Sarajevo as a difference in plumbing. This difference for them becomes the step toward reimagining the theater along Beckettian lines. As actor Izudin Bajrovic says, “Let me explain the difference between Sarajevo and New York theater. It’s the same difference as the difference in significance between a four liter plastic water container here in Sarajevo and in New York. In New York you buy it full of water and you put it in the fridge and use it up and throw it away. No story. Here we can make a production about finding and filling this container which would last for 18 hours and a half.”<sup>64</sup> Actor Emina Muftig quickly follows this up with “After that, with its contents, we could wash one human body.”<sup>65</sup> Bajrovic pictures theater as a drama of the *aquilex*, beginning with the quest to find a container. The container is filled and emptied without stop, an infinite cycle resembling the punishment in ancient hell of the Danaïdes, forced to draw water using leaky buckets and hence guaranteeing their work would always be in vain. Bajrovic’s hypothetical play is the Sarajevan street version of *Godot*, much longer, much emptier, and transposing the water gatherer from the audience onto the stage.

## Theater without a Lobby

Sontag stages only the first act of *Waiting for Godot* and offers competing justifications for her decision to eliminate the second act from her performance. On the one hand, she grounds this decision in practical considerations: Sarajevo now lacks sufficient facilities for a full and proper production of the play, she says. On the other hand, Sontag invokes a humanitarian mission: the people of Sarajevo have been through enough already. They are hungry. They are injured. They have lost family members. A relentless shelling continues, and bombs threaten to destroy anything at any moment—including the space of the theater itself. It is too much to ask them to sit through a second act of *Godot*. Furthermore, Sontag seems to say, even if the theater were safe (which it is not), even if the people were not hungry (though they are), she would not stage the second act because it portrays a relentless hopelessness that runs counter to her mission and ambition for the play in Sarajevo.

Critics have mostly been unable to unravel the logic and complexity of Sontag's argument. They tend to emphasize either the infidelity of the production to Beckett's play or the supposed selfishness of Sontag's gesture. Everett Frost does both in observing, "Chopping the play in half for Sarajevo, as if it were the lady in the circus, makes at least as much sense as tearing it into digestible little bits, like Pentheus, for sticking into film documentaries on Beckett, on modern theatre, existentialism, etc."<sup>66</sup> In this highly colorful remark, Frost distances himself from Sontag's claim that abbreviating the play was a humanitarian gesture and blinds himself to Sontag's argument for its necessity. "Chopping" for Frost is a magician's stage spectacle performed on behalf of Sarajevo.<sup>67</sup> He compares Sontag's work to activities that go on ideally in isolation. Frost ignores how war is not a mere backdrop for Sontag's play but behind Sontag's decision. Cutting the play in two makes little sense, but not because it resembles a mysterious trick. It makes little sense because the break is precipitated by the senseless intrusion of the war into the theater. The war's arrival is as senseless as would be Godot's, were he to appear. Frost's comparison ignores the violence of the interruption. In the circus act, neither the box nor the woman is really sawed in half. The wooden box is imperceptibly cut before the performance so that its two halves can be separated on stage. Yet Sontag saws prior to this cut. The war induces a fissure in the play along an unprescribed line, short of the one set by Beckett through the division of the play into two acts. Like an audience member at the circus, Frost is spell-bound by the removal of the second half, but what are we to make of the more preposterous removal: the amputation of the intermission?

What tangible and practical constraints are placed by the war, and how do they force the directorial hand? Although the theater itself where the piece was performed was apparently intact, shelling destroyed most of the auxiliary spaces, including the lobby. Sontag's performance deals with the loss of these spaces to the war. She describes how she had to take a path outside the range of sniper fire to get to the only usable entryway to the theater: a stage door in the back. She explains, "The theatre's façade, lobby, cloakroom, and bar had been wrecked by shelling more than a year earlier and the debris still had not been cleared away."<sup>68</sup> This is no mere architectural detail to Sontag's story. It shows the effect of shelling on the place of performance and seems in itself to make her point that war affects the theater (the building) before it affects the theater (the institution). Theater contoured itself and reimagined itself in accordance with the spaces available in the besieged city. Dubravko Bibanovic, director of the Sarajevo War Theater, takes this further: theater becomes a refuge, a strategy for survival. He performs his work *Bomb Shelter* in basements throughout the city, "not because they are appropriate environments for the theme but because they offer a safe haven from snipers and bombardments."<sup>69</sup>

But Sontag is not content just to assert that the physical space does not allow for the full performance. She also has a humanitarian mission: she says that the audience is itself bombed out. No more than the physical space of the theater is the audience capable of absorbing more Beckett. It is as if it, too, is shell-shocked and lacks, due to trauma brought on by the war, the capacity to experience the full play as Beckett wrote it. "How could I ask the audience, which would have no lobby, bathroom, or water, to sit so uncomfortably, without moving, for two and a half hours?"<sup>70</sup> Thus Sontag mediates the ruined performance space and the grimness of the play itself. The two seem to have an additive, even synergistic impact in that Beckett's drama and the impaired theater facility create an uncomfortable and immobilizing experience for the spectator. Sontag's practical impulse involves the physical world and physical and spatial limitations. Her humanitarian impulse is grounded in the psychological, the subjective condition of members of the audience.

The destroyed lobby of the Youth Theater of Sarajevo changes the function of waiting for a play in which, like no other, waiting is essential. One way to tackle the question of the double emergence of the practical and humanitarian impulse in Sontag's writing on the production is to look closely at the role of the lobby in Sontag's directorial argument. In destroying the lobby, the war inflicted damage on the architecture of the *Godot* experience. The elimination of the paraperformance space exemplifies this lack of choice the war imposes. Stated differently, the war occasions only

an uninterrupted *Godot*. In her introductory remarks to the audience before the play, Sontag suggests that it was the war that somehow cut the play in half. Only act 1 is performed because “Sarajevo itself seems to be in a historical first act.”<sup>71</sup> The war forces Sontag to extract from *Waiting for Godot* that period of grace in which the spectator can ask whether she wants to go back, either for more or for less. The spectator returns either because her expectation (a type of hope) has not been adequately undone by act 1 or because she wants to affirm the futile waiting of the play and get away from the socialized waiting of the lobby space.

But because there is no place to go, no lobby for the audience to retire to and no space outside the space of performance, the audience in the Sarajevo production is quite literally pulled on stage. Illuminated only by the “uncontrollable chiaroscuro” of a few candles, Sontag has the audience huddle at the periphery of the stage.<sup>72</sup> War conditions bring the audience nearer to the waiting characters. In a separate context, Hugh Kenner remarks that “the stage is a place to wait. The place itself waits when no one is in it.”<sup>73</sup> In *Endgame*, the curtain rises to reveal figures covered in sheets, like objects in storage protected from the gathering dust. Where *Endgame* confines waiting to the stage, the waiting process bleeds out of *Godot* into the spaces adjacent to the stage: the audience area and the lobby, a space less often noted as significant to Beckett’s play. Soon after the curtain rises for act 2, Vladimir asks, “And where were we yesterday evening, according to you?” To this Estragon replies, “How would I know? In another compartment. There’s no lack of void.”<sup>74</sup> The structure of the theater consists of a series of waiting compartments: the lobby, the house, the empty prison cell, or the depopulated areas outside the Youth Theater. The stage is as empty and unremarkable as these other spaces. The Sarajevo performance of *Godot* without a lobby and before an audience—locked first in a theater of war and then in a theater during war—is in fact highly Beckettian. Sontag notes that the audience is as if paralyzed, “unable to move for two and a half hours.” She does not clarify the source of the audience’s paralysis, whether it is caused by Beckett’s play (partially hypnotic, like a broken stopwatch swinging before the eyes) or the fact that this audience has nowhere to take a break, that is, *no recourse*.<sup>75</sup> The war triggers not only Sontag’s decision to stage half the play (no lobby, no second act) but also an audience experience wholly locked inside the theater, in the manner of the prisoner in his cell.

The lobby is typically a theater’s designated space for waiting. For every play, the intermission is when the audience waits for the second act to begin. The waiting during *Godot*’s intermission brings the waiting during

the play to a different level of reflection. The spectators wait among each other and convert their waiting into opinion, chatter. The setting enforces a gregarious and more occupied form of waiting, yet the suspicions about what we are waiting for (during the play) do not abate. The war forces us to approach the question of directorial fidelity differently. How does one remain faithful to an intermission? What function is served by the pause between the acts of *Godot*? Focused on the production as she is, Sontag fails to ask these questions. She attributes the potential discomfort of her audience to two and a half hours of sedentary waiting. No play makes us more painfully aware of our seated posture as spectators: the characters' concluding vow to leave, freezing into an immobile tableau before the drop of the curtain, inspires an awkward uncertainty in us about getting up. While in the lobby we ponder whether we want to return to our seats. Without electricity the Youth Theater cannot even oblige the ceremony of dimming the lights to signal the end of intermission.

The lobby provides the space of a decision, where we either affirm or break our contract with the play. Only here can we curtail waiting without interrupting that of either the audience or the actors during the performance. Innumerable anonymous departures in the intermission counterbalance the one great no-show after which the play takes its name. We have, however, one departure on record.<sup>76</sup> Giacometti sculpts a tree and a single leaf for Beckett's stage in a 1961 production of *Godot*. Beckett writes, "Giacometti did a fine tree for *Godot*. . . . But at the Générale [he] left at the interval because he couldn't bear it any longer! His tree, he said, perhaps he meant something else."<sup>77</sup> Knowlson's comment that "both tree and leaf have disappeared" does not address the question: Why does Giacometti disappear?<sup>78</sup> Sitting at a forced remove from his own work, did the artist feel the waiting process eating into him? Was he dismayed at the way the vagabonds do everything but take an axe to it? Giacometti's luminous tree, resembling a subaquatic creature with long tentacles for branches, undergoes slow defoliation throughout act 1.<sup>79</sup> Did Giacometti depart out of pride? Vladimir and Estragon first want to instrumentalize Giacometti's artwork by hanging themselves from it, before it is made inadequate for that purpose. They undercut the singularity of the sculpture by suggesting Godot means them to wait by another tree—lone-standing, the tree is not unique and has a forest of likenesses. It might even be the wrong tree. They argue over its classification: willow or bush? The artist did not hang around long enough to hear Vladimir say, "[looking round] 'It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing. There's a tree.'"<sup>80</sup> The dialogue in the first act is a verbal handbook on how to disassemble not just Giacometti's tree

but also the tree image Ferdinand de Saussure uses in his *Course on General Linguistics* to exemplify the imprint left in the mind by the signifier *arbor/un arbre*.<sup>81</sup>

It is not clear whether or not Sontag needs or wants a lobby in Sarajevo, since there were humanitarian reasons not to perform the second act. The bombs ruin the lobby and make intermission impossible. The sedentary confinement of her audience offers only part of Sontag's reason to break the play off at intermission. She also says that their suffering outside the theater may be placated by her decision. She amputates their grief. About act 2, Sontag observes, "Not only has one more day gone by. Everything is worse. Lucky no longer can speak, Pozzo is now pathetic and blind, Vladimir has given in to despair. Perhaps I felt that the despair of Act I was enough for the Sarajevo audience, and I wanted to spare them a second time when Godot does not arrive."<sup>82</sup> Munk, in attendance at several performances of *Godot* in Sarajevo, echoes Sontag: "The unrelenting grimness of a second act in which things repeat themselves only to get worse was too cruel a gift for this audience."<sup>83</sup> An intermission in this context would only offer a pause in the steady escalation of misery in the play. Sontag's production ultimately replaces this worsening with a finality. She underscores the positive by-product of this decision. By seeing nothing happen only once, and not twice, hope would be spared for the audience: "Maybe I wanted to propose, subliminally, that Act II might be different."<sup>84</sup>

## What Is Enough: Is Beckett's Intention Lost in Sarajevo?

Regardless of its context in Sarajevo, Sontag's reading directly counteracts the intended experience of destitution in Beckett's work. Beckett's play is an experiment in subtraction: not only are the characters' states worsened, but the waiting process gnaws deeply into the *now* of the performance, following the logic that the more things stay the same, the more things change (for the worse). The crucial interception and misunderstanding of Beckett's work is in Sontag's statement of how the despair of act 1 was enough for the Sarajevo audience. Is it the director's responsibility to decide what is enough despair for her audience? The intermission between acts in fact forces the spectator to ponder this ceiling of misery for herself.

Beckett's play offers a language with which to question Sontag's decision. She justifies her decision of a terminal limit with a word drawn from the play itself: "enough." Does her use of the term here indicate an under-

standing of Beckett's play, and what kind of reading of *Godot* does Sontag enact with her justification? Vladimir and Estragon push the term "enough" back and forth tirelessly. "Enough" seems to designate a provisional measure, wholly in keeping with the play's world of immeasurable destitution. The term makes meek adjustments each time it is uttered. As Estragon is trying on recently found boots, Vladimir inquires, "They don't hurt you?" to which Estragon replies, "Not yet." (That is the hurting in this world, by the way. You cannot say no to the pain of a shoe, only "not yet.") Vladimir's inquiries increase in their intensity:

VLADIMIR. Then you can keep them.  
 ESTRAGON. They're too big.  
 VLADIMIR. Perhaps you'll have socks some day.  
 ESTRAGON. True.  
 VLADIMIR. Then you'll keep them.  
 ESTRAGON. That's enough about these boots.  
 VLADIMIR. Yes, but . . .  
 ESTRAGON. (*violently*) Enough! (*Silence.*) I suppose I might as well sit down.<sup>85</sup>

In this "Enough!" we see the suddenly exposed skin of the conversation, suggesting an impatience we do not expect from those condemned to wait. How do the hungry get fed up? Estragon's "enough" signals a kind of irritated limit where need grinds against need. Screamed, the word actually induces silence from Vladimir. Yet the term registers neither a lasting limit nor a new topic for conversation (no new leaves are turned in this play). The beggars constantly scrutinize the adequacy designated by the term as well as the adequacy of the term. When Vladimir says, "DON'T TELL ME," emphatically indicating he has no interest in hearing his cohort talk aloud about his dreams, Estragon replies, "(*gesture towards the universe*) This one is enough for you?"<sup>86</sup> Sontag passes a verdict on the enough, decreeing one act to be adequate despair for the audience. In doing so, she tries to play the role of Vladimir, saying to Beckett's play, "Don't tell me!" Estragon's gesture therefore encompasses both Sontag and Sarajevo. Estragon suggests that Vladimir's desire not to hear him is his satiation, even complacency, with the world-as-nightmare. His gesture toward the universe echoes his earlier one over the rags he wears. It is a gesture sweeping over rubbish we plainly see and offered anew to our consideration. His question addresses Vladimir's censorship by pointing out the sorry state of the world. The world is a joke, so you don't want to hear mine? In this

moment Estragon gruesomely mirrors the title of the James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*. In the film, wanting more is the only option, and the world becomes just another object for desire to exceed. Estragon starts here, with the inadequacy of the world as dream. The world is not enough for Estragon, but from the standpoint of need, not desire. Estragon configures the world as dream because it is the model for a half-remembered and unpossessed experience, one that remains at odds with conscious life. During the performance of the Sarajevo production, Estragon waves his hand over the debris of the ruined Youth Theater. His question highlights the inadequacy of Sontag's limit of adequate despair.<sup>87</sup>

Measures for need are at best temporary and unstable. "Enough" has a troubled valence. It can suggest both a maximum and a minimum, too little (just barely enough) and too much (enough already!). The irritability with which Vladimir and Estragon employ the term suggests it can designate both at the same time. Sontag thinks she can use the term to issue a ceiling to the despair of Sarajevo, as if to say, "Enough with despair; act 1 is enough." She fails to hear how the play works to remove the illusory satiation (of both joy and despair) from the term. For Beckett, the most slender quantity designated by the enough, its minimum, is not enough: not because we need more but because we need less. Beckett creates *Godot* as a laboratory of the enough in which the vagabonds whittle this negligible quantity (of hope, of meaning, of carrots) down further, rather than whittling time away, as is often claimed. When we think meaning has hit a maximum state of depletion, Estragon pushes it further.

VLADIMIR. This is becoming really insignificant.

ESTRAGON. Not enough.

*Silence.*<sup>88</sup>

Sontag employs *enough* only as a limit, without taking into consideration the possibility that it is also an injunction: to reduce, to get worse, to mean and to become less.<sup>89</sup> Estragon's Beckettian poverty is a worsening condition and not a static one.

## Chan's Inspiration: Terrible Symmetry and the Uncanny

The landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans has been described as many things—a moonscape, a postnuclear disaster, the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy. When Chan visited the city in 2007, he saw Beckett's stage. Chan

ascribes this initial impression as the inspiration for staging *Godot* in the most devastated areas, which retained the appearance of a ghost town two years after the flood: "Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science fiction movie. Waiting for a ride to pick me up after visiting with some Common Ground volunteers who were gutting houses in the Lower Ninth, I realized it didn't look like a movie set, but the stage for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence."<sup>90</sup> The impression this scene makes on Chan lies between what he sees and something he half remembers. Chan's friends respond cinematographically to the post-Katrina landscape. They push New Orleans into the future and into the background of the future. Grasped as a potential film image, the disaster is one that is both yet to happen and already will have happened.<sup>91</sup> This landscape does not exist for Chan in the future any more than the past. It has a different kind of implication for him—not as something unseen, not as something recorded in biblical mythology. Though it is devoid of signs, the landscape suggests a *déjà vu* moment. The destroyed city is familiar, writes Chan, but neither as imaginary wrath nor as film, and not from the other disaster areas to which he has been witness, such as Baghdad after the shelling by US troops and the "ghost town known as downtown Detroit."<sup>92</sup> New Orleans compels an involuntary memory of *Godot*, filling Chan with inner conviction: "It was unmistakable." In this vision, theater and disaster mutually articulate one another but do not synthesize into one thing: "What's more, there was a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and funny things people do while they wait: for help, for food, for hope. It was uncanny."<sup>93</sup>

Chan's impression passes through the aesthetic experience of the uncanny. In fact, he repositions the notion of the uncanny through the rapport between Beckett's stage and the devastated landscape. Chan turns Freud's definition of the uncanny inside out. In his essay on the topic, Freud explores the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) as a disturbance to the familiar, an interruption to our seamless intimacy with the well-known.<sup>94</sup> Freud's examples include Hoffman's *The Sand-Man*, a short story featuring a doll that takes on the appearance of an animated being, and the figure of the double in psychoanalysis.<sup>95</sup> Freud also cites from his own life in exploring his definition of the uncanny. Discussing his experience of "walking in the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me," he describes his repeated attempts to get out of a certain section of town, only to find himself once again back in the same place.<sup>96</sup> Freud remarks that

this failure to navigate a foreign city, illuminated by the sudden familiarity of the spot one was trying to leave, “recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states.”<sup>97</sup>

Chan’s use of the uncanny has a twin focus. In New Orleans, the stage becomes the unexpectedly animated double of the living environment, and Beckett’s stage is the space to which Chan returns in trying to find his way through the unfamiliar city. Chan thereby merges Freud’s two examples of the uncanny. Like Hoffman’s doll, Beckett’s stage loses its customary “theatrical” status and the stage disappears. Chan calls this “the realization of the play through the city.”<sup>98</sup> Chan finds an exacerbation of the *Unheimlich* in this city where the citizens are renamed refugees and where for months after the flood innumerable stoops escalate into empty space leading up to a vanished home. As sections of the city are made foreign and uninhabitable, New Orleans becomes uncanny on a scale greater than Freud’s experience in the provincial Italian town. The helplessness that Freud considers reminiscent of “dream-states” becomes an everyday waking-state reality for the survivors of Katrina. A landscape of people displaced from their homes or finding it impossible to feel at home in their trailers becomes the setting for a municipal uncanny.<sup>99</sup>

For Chan, *Godot* ultimately provides the means to understand and artistically process devastation. In particular, Chan envisions the performance of Beckett’s work as a way to remark on losses suffered by the community in New Orleans. “Seeing *Godot* embedded in the very fabric of the landscape of New Orleans was my way of reimagining the empty roads, the debris, and above all, the bleak silence as more than the expression of a mere collapse.”<sup>100</sup>

New Orleans attracts many artists with the same intention. Graffiti artist Banksy leaves his stenciled figures on buildings in Tremé, another impoverished and devastated quarter, and the flooded Lower Ninth Ward. One of Banksy’s graffiti features the Morton Salt Girl. In this version, rain pours down on the girl from under the umbrella while she reaches out her hand to catch a single drop of oil sludge rolling off the umbrella’s exterior. Painted years before the 2010 BP Deep Horizon gulf oil spill, Banksy’s vision prophetically compresses that disaster with the Katrina catastrophe. He allegorically reworks an iconic brand figure. The umbrella is a longtime symbol of insurance agencies and works here like the failed levee. Though designed to keep the girl from getting wet, it is in fact the source of water falling upon her. Instead of reimagining the catastrophe à la Banksy’s dense layering of meanings, Chan says he seeks to “reimage” it. This means using the stage as an echo chamber for the empty roads, the debris, and the

silence after the flood. Chan's theater allows us to notice these elements of the landscape, to take stock of them through a stage meshing with the environment in which they appear. Reimaging means imaging them in order to make them more visible, to cultivate within the spectator that *déjà vu* between Beckett's stage and the Lower Ninth Ward that inspired Chan's project. Filming these elements within the post-Katrina landscape, as Chan's friends imagined, would only metamorphose them into a sensationally empty landscape. Film would transform the condition of mere collapse not into expression but into spectacle. Where cinema would extend our rubbernecking, Chan's theater elicits a double take in which we take stock of landscape, characters, and audience.

## Theater of Aftermath: No-Man versus Anybody

Staging *Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly raises questions about the specificity of performance in Beckett's work. Here, a tension arises between keeping the play generic and giving it a specific dimension, a specific meaning it may assume by placing it within the landscape of a historic disaster. Many critics argue that the play rejects this. Calling *Godot* "outside all temporal reality," Bert States, for example, describes how the dialogue uttered by the vagabonds "implies the same refusal to come to rest in a specific history as the refusal of the play's tree (a squandered space) to abide by the laws of botanical growth."<sup>101</sup> States emphasizes the timelessness within Beckett's play and argues that this accords the play its classic status. States regards Beckett's generic as purity easily contaminated by details involved in any specific performance:

You can destroy the generic effect of Beckett's wasteland ("A country road. A tree. Evening.") or at least set it at odds with the action it is to contain, by simply littering it with the content of a history (refuse, ruins, billboards), things heavy with a definite past and consequently destined for future use. Chekhov's famous remark that if there is a pistol on stage in Act I it must be fired in Act IV is a condensation of this idea: objects in the dramatic universe are "waiting" objects; like traps, they exist only to exert their potential.<sup>102</sup>

For States, ruins are a directorial choice, placed on stage through littering. This refuse vitiates the utopic emptiness of the play as it would the grass in a brochure from the parks department. Cluttering Beckett's wasteland with

proof of its wasteland status only counteracts the play's "refusal of history." In his reference to litter, States may have in mind such productions as the 1955 Broadway version, which "takes place in what appears to be the town dump, with a blasted tree rising out of a welter of rusting junk, including plumbing parts."<sup>103</sup>

Chan's production constitutes a reply to the claim that Beckett is intended as generic and that historical specificity is a betrayal of Beckett's intention. Chan stages *Godot* in an environment where ruin exceeds confinement to the stage or the delicate status of litter. The dump is not staged; it is real. Debris is not ornament, but inevitable and constitutive of the performance place: signless posts, an empty road without street signs, a storm-bent light pole, a sea of weeds where houses once stood, stoops ascending nowhere, a FEMA trailer, and (in Gentilly) an abandoned house. In the setting of desolated New Orleans, this is already the generic. To remove the litter would be to introduce a specificity that Beckett did not intend. These remnants of the flood are, as States claims, "things heavy with a definite past." Yet we cannot piece their sense together into a future the way States claims, for they do not "exist only to exert their potential." The Lower Ninth Ward setting reverses the temporality of Chekhov's example because the gun has already gone off.

Andrea Boll extends the metaphor of Chan's Lower Ninth Ward production in which the generic conditions for Beckett's play are achieved through the wearing down or stripping away of specificity. She notes that following the play the actors as well as the audience members disappear into the wasteland. For Boll, the lesson of the play arrives only as an afterthought and with the disappearance of both actors and audience. What we have witnessed is not a no-man's-land but "somebody's life." She observes, "The lights fade. The play ends. We applaud. The cast disappears into the black night as does the audience. And yet, the setting remains: a destroyed house in a sea of destroyed houses. Not a backdrop, but somebody's life they do not know what to do with."<sup>104</sup> The landscape is not there to merely provide our line of vision with an abstract point of disappearance. Not the disappearance of vision, but somebody's life they (the somebody? FEMA?) did "not know what to do with," life in a state of extreme obsolescence. This suggests another angle from which *Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward forces us to rethink the status of the generic. No-man's-land and anybody's life are emphatically different types of anonymity. The no-man's-land is States's vision of Beckett's formal purity, a space born generic and without qualities.

Chan (and Boll) underscore the imperfect and acquired anonymity of Beckett's landscape, whose defining characteristics and contours have been

forcibly wiped away. *Anybody* is a person dispossessed of the right to be somebody, or to be known, to have a name. Critics frequently discuss Beckett's vagabonds as the Everyman. Yet this term only underscores allegorical possibility and an inclusiveness that suggests the vagabond to be a leviathan figure.<sup>105</sup> *Anybody* suggests intrinsic vacancy, a slot no longer occupied by this anybody. Boll notes how this context affects how she overhears certain lines in the play:

So when a blind Pozzo asks Didi what it looks like out here and Didi replies, "It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing," "nothing" takes on a different connotation than the setting Beckett had imagined as "A country road. A tree. Evening." This sort of nothing is worse—more terrifying because this sort of nothing has been created by loss, by the absence of what was once living and whole, filled with light and possibility rather than a nothing that is nothing because it never existed.<sup>106</sup>

Boll's stocktaking of this difference between nothing and loss is the effect of theater in the aftermath. The fracture between *no-man's* and *somebody's* is initiated in Chan's decision about the location of the play. Beckett's generic space has a name and can be found on the map of New Orleans after the flood.

Thus the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly designate places the disaster levels into noplaces. They have become shorthand for the way in which the city was destroyed along lines of class and race, as the poorer, lower-lying sections of the city are inhabited mostly by African Americans. Areas around Tulane University, by contrast, go unharmed. The failure of the levee system, not Hurricane Katrina, destroys New Orleans. The leveling of the city does not follow the indiscriminate swath of a tsunami. The disaster discriminates according to the class that can only afford to live in the low-lying areas. Vladimir and Estragon are played by J. Kyle Manzay and Wendell Pierce. Chan's *Godot* played before a predominantly white audience, and in this regard differed sharply from the prison and Sarajevo performances in which the line between actor and spectator was only faintly drawn. The waiting figures in the play are performed by African American actors. Chan confines the more evident hierarchy of master-slave (Pozzo and Lucky) to white actors.<sup>107</sup>

The tree created for this production signifies the hybrid nature of the disaster. The base of the tree is a light stand. Halfway up the stand is a metal arm that resembles a branch. A thin wooden trunk, from which a wooden branch extends, completes the vertical. Cardboard is haphazardly

gathered at the base of the tree, seemingly to conceal the extended legs of the stand. In the context of the Lower Ninth Ward, this tree is no longer required to emblemize the barrenness of the stage. Instead it becomes a cue, a weather vane, to the hybrid of the man-made and the natural. Its construction points back to the conjunction of forces that crafted the disaster.

The spectator literally keeps this disaster in view. At the far end of Prieur Street the levee is clearly illuminated. Its distance from the stage endows its image with the quality of an afterthought or an insurgent memory. Productions of *Godot* in traditional theater settings labor to create an indistinct horizon on stage, a grey backdrop in which ground and sky merge indistinguishably. Yet the point of disappearance in the Lower Ninth was a spotlight shining on the levee as if it were something to be watched closely, even at a distance. Chan devises two spatial scenes for *Godot*: the play before us in which nothing happens (twice) and this other scene where something catastrophic (a failure of civil engineering) had already occurred. Instead of foreground versus background/backdrop, Chan's staging introduces a terrible symmetry between two events (the levee and the play, the disaster that transpired and the disaster of something not transpiring).

The aftermath quality to the performance reveals itself in the resonance words have in the setting. The disjunctive dialogue between the vagabonds generates tools for the displaced. In her review of the play, Boll envisions the conditions of the Lower Ninth Ward as the setting in which Beckett's play fulfills itself:

"What is there to recognize?" asks Gogo. Yes, what is there to recognize anymore? One day you wake up in your formaldehyde FEMA trailer, and somebody has chopped down all the trees on your street because even though they appeared to be alive, they were actually dead. An entire block of houses has been demolished. Everybody has left except you.<sup>108</sup>

You will confess like Gogo to your best friend, your neighbors, your contractor, yourself, to anybody who will listen, "I can't go on like this," and have them pat you on the back and say with amusement like Didi, "That's what you think."<sup>109</sup>

Boll suggests that context does not restrict the meaning of Beckett's play but releases it. The performance of Beckett's play in a disaster setting does not produce interpretations per se, but rather a deeper echo of the work within spaces and situations throughout the city. For Boll, Beckett lets us see the tragicomic gesture in the contractor's pat on your back. Beckett adds his aftermath to that of the disaster. In the process, it acquires an address,

perched somewhere between anybody and somebody: the *you*. “Everybody has left except you.” Boll does not hereby personalize the experience of Beckett, even as this “you” is not the collective you of her readership. She addresses the single you, the one deprived of context, neighbors, and what the law calls all personal effects. This you is the last you, the generic particular.

## Beckett’s Poverty in Sarajevo and New Orleans

Beckett’s play resonates in environments where the destitution exceeds that of Beckett’s stage. In these environments the very production of *Waiting for Godot* colludes with the stage deprived of its *deus ex machina*, leaving only the scantiest of theatrical machines. The memory of a couple living without shelter informs Sontag’s vision for the play. She models one Vladimir and Estragon pair “on homeless people I’d seen in downtown Manhattan.”<sup>110</sup> Yet Sontag experiences the force of the play, its central topic of futility and the inadequacy of means, most clearly in the effort of putting the play on: “Sometimes I thought we were not waiting for Godot, or Clinton. We were waiting for our props.”<sup>111</sup> The candles that light the stage seem to arrive mysteriously. Like the boots Estragon finds on stage in act 2, the candles just appear: “When I asked for additional candles, I was told there weren’t any. Later I was told that they were being saved for our performances. In fact, I never learned who doled out the candles; they were simply in place on the floor when I arrived each morning.”<sup>112</sup> She cannot find any rope for Pozzo until a week before the opening, the bowler hats and boots materialize only in the last days of rehearsal, and the costumes arrive the day before the opening. Sontag notes how carrots are in such short supply that she substitutes rolls “scavenged” from the Holiday Inn where she is staying.<sup>113</sup> The rationing inflicted on Sarajevo by the war makes it impossible to find not only a chicken for Pozzo but an edible substitute for one. To paraphrase Hamm in *Endgame*: “There are no more chickens” in Sarajevo, “nor are there any counterparts.” Sontag designs a fowl for Pozzo out of papier-mâché. The absence of electricity forces Sontag to rehearse and perform the play by flashlight and candlelight. Even Beckett’s text has to be parceled between the three Didi/Gogo couples on stage. An interviewer’s question, “How did you decide what to give to whom?” suggests a secondary motivation for tripling the pair: to distribute two roles among six unemployed Sarajevan actors and subsequently to ration their lines from an already skimpy text.<sup>114</sup>

The staging of poverty that Beckett's play demands is difficult outside of devastated areas, such as Sarajevo and New Orleans. Beckett's play does not illustrate sociological conditions of poverty. These conditions are not illuminated, as they are in Victor Hugo's work, by what people are forced to do on account of them. Beckett's poverty militates against self-evidence, and the recognizable markers of destitution are put in retreat in the process. Critics sometimes become accountants in trying to enforce a verisimilitude over Beckett's work that is only too apparent in the New Orleans productions. In his study *Beckett/Beckett*, for example, Vivian Mercier states his goal to "establish the extent to which [Beckett's] leading characters can be said to have 'come down in the world' in a social and economic sense as well as a psychological or even moral one."<sup>115</sup> Mercier quantifies the "formal education" of characters (and hence their "comfortable upbringing") by tallying the "unambiguously learned references" they make.<sup>116</sup> In discussing *All that Fall*, Mercier gets down to brass tacks: "If we are to take Mr. Rooney's calculations seriously, he earns only about £2 a week yet pays £12 a year for his season ticket alone. Clearly he is losing money by going to the city every day. But in all probability, since he owns a house in a desirable location, he has a private income."<sup>117</sup> Mercier here audits Beckett's characters rather than listens to them. Mercier wants to establish positive textual proof for the destitution of Beckett's characters, wants to close the condition by ascertaining its beginning and end. This method ignores Beckett's more thoroughgoing poverty, which pushes beyond the question of character income and includes our engagement with it. Here we might recall Beckett's remark in his essay on Joyce: "Literary criticism is not book-keeping."<sup>118</sup> For Beckett, criticism should not convert the literary work into data. More importantly, the critical gesture cannot keep or retain possession of the book it addresses. The book is to recede from and baffle the critic, and the interpretation is not to interrupt (or arrest) the dereliction of the book. We witness this recession by the text of *Godot* in the moment Estragon calls attention to the visible index of his impoverishment: his rags. Vladimir says, "You should have been a poet." Estragon replies, "I was. (*Gesture towards rags.*) Isn't that obvious?"<sup>119</sup> Here the play inserts a new (and, to us, foreign) understanding of the obvious, the sign in its state of maximal exposure. Should it have already been obvious to Vladimir and to us that Estragon was a poet or that poetry is the only suitable preparation for dereliction? Beckett makes it difficult for us to separate the joke from the commentary, the gesture of *ecce homo!* from one that furnishes proof.

The landscape of New Orleans conjures the image of Beckett's destitute stage without the need for Mercier's calculations. Speaking of the devas-

tated areas of the city, Chan notes, "It was truly a landscape of impoverishment."<sup>120</sup> Chan ultimately stages *Godot* in two areas from which people, road signs, and habitable structures have been notably uprooted by the flooding: an intersection in the Lower Ninth Ward and an abandoned house in Gentilly. Here Chan experiences something like an involuntary memory of Beckett's stage: "Standing there at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes, I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*."<sup>121</sup> The setting hallucinates Chan into *Godot*.

In a seeming answer to Chan's visual image of devastation, Lois Oppenheim notes in her analysis of Beckett's visuality, "In Beckett's theater the image outweighs the word: The two tramps of *Godot*, Winnie in her mound, heads peering from within trash cans and funerary urns in *Endgame* and *Play* have a force more enduring than the scripted text."<sup>122</sup> Oppenheim ascribes enduring force to Beckett's images of bodies trapped within monstrous enclosures, the mounds of dirt, urns, and trash cans that usurp our focus. The couple, Vladimir and Estragon, however, form a memorable image through an inverse condition: exposure. Exposure both to the elements—Estragon says he sleeps in a ditch—and to the spectators' view combine to make the stage a defenseless space, both temporary and restrictive, like an unauthorized encampment. This is the precise environment of both Sarajevo and New Orleans. As Goytisolo observes, every remaining inhabitant of Sarajevo "must get used to sleeping, moving, walking about fully aware of your defenseless, precarious existence."<sup>123</sup> The exposure of Beckett's characters is accented in Chan's production by the absence of a proper stage, which is signaled only by the sudden and impertinent grouping of the audience risers at an abandoned intersection.

In the light of the exposed condition of destitution, we must qualify Oppenheim's claim that Vladimir and Estragon form an image of enduring force. Their endurance comes from a place other than strength. Vladimir and Estragon weather their exposure with something closer to obduracy than to traditional courage. They endure as survivors who have fallen through the cracks; they endure by chance. They bring to mind what Kafka says about the wax Odysseus puts in his ears to save himself from the Siren's song: "Proof that inadequate, even childish measures, may serve to rescue one from peril."<sup>124</sup> In the dispossessed world of Beckett's characters, Odysseus's wax would strike us as sheer luxury. Vladimir and Estragon seem without means, even inadequate or childish ones. Unlike Odysseus, they consequently have no choice but to take in the silence that engulfs the stage. At the end of his study on Proust, Beckett writes that Proust's narrator is preoccupied with an "invisible reality" of art that "damns the life of

the body on earth as a pensum [a routine burden] and reveals the meaning of the word 'defunctus.'"<sup>125</sup> Where Proust's narrator reveals the meaning of *defunctus*, *Godot* just reveals the state.<sup>126</sup> The exposure wrought by Beckett's play is not to be confused with "explicitness," with a conveyance of meanings. Nothing works, usefulness is a quaint idea, and life itself has become an anachronism, yet this does not come to us courtesy of a character's soliloquy. The poverty of Beckett's stage offers no terms or conditions for itself, just a condition.

The destitution wrought by the war in Sarajevo is visible in the very bodies of the actors on stage. Sontag notes how the actors evince physical exhaustion in excess of the script's talk about futility and hunger: "The actors were visibly underweight and tired easily. Beckett's Lucky must stand motionless through most of his long scene without ever setting down the heavy bag he carries. Atko . . . asked me to excuse him if he occasionally rested his empty suitcase on the floor. Whenever I halted the run-through for a few minutes to change a movement or a line reading, all the actors, with the exception of Ines, would instantly lie down on the stage."<sup>127</sup> *Godot* in Sarajevo illuminates how labor-intensive it is to be (or even just play) the vagabond—a character who seems to have nothing to do. Vladimir and Estragon conduct methodical ceremonies of movement on stage. The Sarajevo actors, by contrast, register more emphatically the physical exhaustion that accompanies futility. Where Beckett's hobos use the pauses in the script to think, to listen intently, or to survey the stage, the performers in Sontag's production seize upon these to lie down. Sontag's words give a glimpse into a historical situation that overlaps the truth of Beckett's stage where simply standing vertically or holding a suitcase throughout rehearsal of act 1 constitute labors that push the human figure to the brink. The war environment rations even the postures of the actor.

Both in New Orleans and Sarajevo the audience is already trained in waiting. At theaters with prestigious addresses, Beckett's wait is absorbed with the patience of understanding that one gives to a uniquely demanding piece of theater. In the Lower Ninth Ward and Sarajevo, waiting can be tempered neither by patience nor impatience. Whether it be waiting for FEMA, for NATO, for Clinton, or for the bombs to stop falling, waiting is endemic to life after a catastrophe. Waiting is the temporal dimension of poverty, and the vagabonds' wait is one that famously does not pay off. Audiences in New Orleans and Sarajevo, like the characters on stage, do not rightly know for what they are waiting, or stated otherwise, the waiting itself is so long and so inevitable that it usurps any reason for waiting.

Part of the frivolousness of the Beckettian waiting is the way its terminus abruptly changes. The characters are waiting for Godot, waiting for night, and also waiting for nothing—just waiting.<sup>128</sup> Waiting makes the *now* of Beckett's stage recede in this manner: waiting displaces the things Vladimir and Estragon do while waiting, and yet the things they do also seem to negate waiting. (We encounter this inability to see waiting and acting simultaneously any time a waiter at a New York restaurant assures us that he or she “really” is, in some other but distant reality, an actor.) In the context of postapocalyptic New Orleans, waiting undercuts any coherent message that the play might seem to offer. The occasional reminder of what the characters are waiting for seems only to interrupt their antics on stage. In the shadow of this afterthought of Godot, they resume their cycle of games. Action and waiting impoverish one another. The abstract inactivity of the waiting process makes it impossible to act on stage or give it a form (something we can “see happening” on stage). The form waiting assumes is the repetition of the play's title.

Titles usually stand outside or above the work, as an umbrella term for the work, providing the identity by which the work is formally recognized (by copyright offices, institutions, etc.). Beckett's is the only play whose title provides its own enigmatic purpose, what we might call the *irrationale* of the play: simultaneously description, justification, and (implicitly) question. The title is immersed within the locution of the play, surfacing whenever Vladimir and Estragon offer their reason for being on stage (phrased as an inability to leave): “We're waiting for Godot.” The repetitions of the title within the dialogue merit the retitling of Beckett's play *Godot 26*, after Anouilh's *Amphitryon 38*, dramatizing the innumerable versions of its mythic tale. Recirculation within the dialogue wears the gleam off the title. It does not become more lucid, just more familiar. The play turns the title into a sentence (in all senses of this word). Vladimir and Estragon add a “we.” Yet the intratextual movement only saps this announcement of its function. Instead of furnishing the vagabonds with a purpose, their declaration/citation only sounds like a confession that they are here for the play, that they constitute the acting troupe assigned to perform the impossible: to act waiting.

In the setting of the Lower Ninth Ward, waiting is inscribed within a landscape that is self-evident for the audience. Director Donald Harworth asks Beckett a question that Chan would never need to ask: “Why is there nothing on the road? Beckett replies, ‘Because it's not a road, it's a track on wasteland.’ Silence. Then, smiling as though seeing the two friends in that

place, he leaned back and said, 'They play a series of games. When one has ended, they start another.' His smile lingered."<sup>129</sup> Beckett clearly wants to cut down or away from the associations Harworth gleans from the stage direction, "a country road": traffic, people, cars, business. Beckett here feels obliged to impoverish what seems on the face of it an already impoverished term—a road. The director's discussion is helpful. It follows the same course of impoverishment that Beckett's work takes, a progression from a road to a track on wasteland. "Track" suggests repetition, like an athletic track, where doing the same thing dominates (rather than a country road suitable for a stroll, as in Kerouac or John Denver). Beckett underscores his stage as closed system (the vagabonds' endless resumption of their games) rather than as a road that is either a destination or a means of traveling between two points. In its very existence, the Lower Ninth Ward incorporates Beckett's reductions. Its unnerving desolation is incarnated through *force majeure* rather than Beckett's stage directions. Dismissed by some critics as Chan's "overtly clumsy attempts to blend in" with local culture, the gumbo and second line/marching band served a vital function in helping the spectators find the stage.<sup>130</sup> The corner of Prieur and Reynes constitutes not a theatrical no-man's-land but a municipal one, as street signs were still absent and the roads remained undesignated. Chan's is the first *Godot* locatable only through GPS.<sup>131</sup>

Beckett's poverty exposes without explanation. This makes seemingly simple critical gestures rather difficult. What, for example, do we call Vladimir and Estragon? The play instills a hesitation in us before naming their status. This hesitation is overcome in Mercier's attempt to ascertain the class status of Beckett's characters, as it is lost in Oppenheim's list of Beckettian images: she names Winnie and names the body parts peeking out of the urns and trash cans. *Godot* ultimately bequeaths to us the image of the tramps rather than that of Vladimir and Estragon. Many critics note that the term "tramp," like the term "clown," is never mentioned in the text or stage directions.<sup>132</sup> Yet it displaces all others in critical discussion of the play. Its massive circulation turns Vladimir and Estragon into the play's emissaries and Beckett into a celebrity. Herbert Blau speaks of Vladimir and Estragon as refugees, long before they appear on the stage in New Orleans. Blau has it right. The term "refugees" as opposed to "tramps" suggests a more forcible displacement or eviction surrounding their condition.<sup>133</sup> And yet, though the term applies to the people of New Orleans en route to Houston or elsewhere, would *Godot* be as widely disseminated through culture were their figures designated as refugees? "Beggar" would underscore the demand made by the figure, rather than their movement

of tramping. Akin to “bumpkin,” “tramp” makes the state of need more digestible to the spectator. It implicitly forges an alliance with the cinematic tramp, Charlie Chaplin. Beckett’s characters, however, share none of the pliancy with which Chaplin adapts to his environment (fed into a machine, Charlie emerges unscathed). Where Chaplin communicates across his silence, his eyebrows stamping the mood for us like emoticons, deep silence punctuates all the things Vladimir and Estragon say, but leave unaddressed, to each another.

Chan’s production of *Godot* engages the scarcity of recognizable markers on Beckett’s stage. Weeks before the opening, Chan posts the famously concise stage directions of Beckett’s play at intersections and dilapidated areas throughout New Orleans: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” Chan takes the stage directions out of hiding and posts them among the other makeshift signs—ads for contractors, homemade street signs—that multiply on telephone poles and park benches following the disaster. Made visible, the stage directions lose their informational function (to stage designers creating a world to be measured by its fidelity to the recipe) and gain a designatory one. The conditions for Beckett’s stage play become an index to the existing condition of the city. Chan’s production contests the traditional model of site-specific artworks, which are uniquely contoured to a particular landscape.<sup>134</sup> The dispersal of Beckett’s directions to the stage calls our attention to New Orleans as a set for multiple productions of *Godot*. Chan uses the play to situate the city and its many forsaken areas rather than tailoring his work to it. Possible stages abound in New Orleans because this play requires the very opposite of a site-specific work. *Godot* needs a space without qualities, a no-man’s-land, a generic site.

The impoverishing effect of waiting can be illuminated in contrast to Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of vigilance. Levinas differentiates between attention, “which is turned towards objects,” and vigilance, “absorbed in the rustling of the unavoidable being and which goes much further.”<sup>135</sup> In this absorption into impersonal being “I still become aware of this anonymous vigilance, but I become aware of it in a movement in which the I is already detached from the anonymity.”<sup>136</sup> He continues: “Our affirmation of an anonymous vigilance goes beyond the *phenomena*, which already presupposes an ego, and thus eludes descriptive phenomenology. Here description would make use of terms while striving to go beyond their constituency; it stages *personages*, while the *there is* the dissipation of personages.”<sup>137</sup> Levinas makes a clear separation between the anonymous vigil and conscious attention to phenomena that “presuppose an ego.” For Beckett, the ego is not so easily shed:

ESTRAGON. We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist.

VLADIMIR. (*impatiently*) Yes, yes, we're magicians.<sup>138</sup>

In these lines Beckett, more than Levinas, expresses the futility of letting go of the ego. If Levinas wants to go beyond the ego, Beckett shows how its occasional reoccurrence (the trivial things it does to give us “the impression that we exist”) only testifies to the dreadful norm—an impressionless existence. This stage coincides with the state of survivors of disaster, who are only reminded of being alive. The “I” in *Godot* is never fully detached from anonymity, and hence waiting never transforms into vigilance. Levinas suggests that philosophy can do without the theater (i.e., phenomenology, which “stages personages”). Beckett uses the stage to suggest the irrelevance of philosophy. The vagabonds, partially anonymous, slowly wither away. Levinas is helpful to people whose understanding of need is part of a conversation that includes its opposite: the rich and varied discourse of civilization. This is to say that nobody reads Levinas after a disaster. Levinas’s figure faces the other, and this sets ethical obligation that precedes existence. Beckett stages something that is in danger of falling short of existence. Need occurs on the stage but outside a dialectical framework. Obligation is replaced by compulsion and inexplicable inertia. People in historical crises forcibly deprived of home, like Didi and Gogo, empathize with the state of anonymity on Beckett’s stage, which offers no countenance.

Unlike Levinas’s vigilance, Beckett’s waiting demands a scarcity of objects rather than their erasure or dismissal. Adorno notes the careful monitoring of what appears on Beckett’s stage. He notes, “The strict ration of reality and characters which the drama is allotted and with which it makes do, is identical to what remains of subject, spirit, and soul in view of the permanent catastrophe.”<sup>139</sup> Western theater is bound up in the notion of mimesis, the adequation between stage and world. Adorno keys in on the *inadequacy* upon Beckett’s stage to counteract this tradition. Whereas Aristotelian theater depends on reason (*ratio*), Beckett’s reality depends on the ratiō. Artaud ascribes the birth of theater to a gesture of useless expenditure. During the plague, he writes, “[The] dregs of humanity, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed, enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. And at that moment the theater is born. The theater, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit.”<sup>140</sup> According to Artaud, theater begins with an obscene disturbance to the property of the rich: the moment the “dregs”

gratuitously pillage their coffers. Beckett's plays begin not in gratuity but in scarcity, one prior to any act or gesture. The dregs Artaud speaks of are on Beckett's stage but are fishing carrots out of their pockets:

VLADIMIR. How's the carrot?

ESTRAGON. It's a carrot.

VLADIMIR. So much the better, so much the better. (*Pause.*) What was it you wanted to know?

ESTRAGON. I've forgotten. (*Chews.*) That's what annoys me. (*He looks at the carrot appreciatively, dangles it between finger and thumb.*) I'll never forget this carrot. (*He sucks the end of it meditatively.*)<sup>141</sup>

Every object seems somehow to have penetrated the fundamental vacancy of Beckett's stage. Beckett's world is no less administered than Kafka's. Yet the labyrinthine bureaucracy that crams Kafka's novels is felt but not seen in Beckett through the ration, through the logic of scarcity.<sup>142</sup> Beckett disposes of the idea that need has a natural basis (mere hunger). Every item, everything edible, appears on his stage with the precision of a bowl of soup pushed through the door to a prisoner in solitary confinement. Need is managed. Moments of excess are infrequent. "You overdo it with your carrots," Vladimir says to Estragon.<sup>143</sup> Vladimir's expression echoes like a verbal remnant from a distant world where people could intimately chastise one another for wanting something in excess of its necessity. The weakness before excess and the articulation of desire over need make little sense between two hobos who have nothing. Here nothing is to be done, let alone overdone. We blink at Vladimir's statement because there is only a single carrot on stage.

We connect this strict rationing behind the play to the privative condition of the beggar. The scantiness of what remains of "subject, spirit, and soul" and even carrots is incorporated into the survival of the characters. In the postapocalyptic scenario of *Endgame*, by contrast, the characters survive the objects. It surpasses the point reached in *Godot* in which objects seem marked for extinction. Characters openly proclaim, almost as a reminder to each other, that an array of objects has achieved extinction: "There are no more coffins!" and "There are no more bicycles." This "no more" is the idiom of Beckett's poverty. But whereas *Godot* suggests there "are no more carrots" for the beggars, *Endgame* suggests the catastrophic absence of these objects: bicycles are no more. Scarcity escalates into gone. If in *Godot* it seems that objects interrupt the void of the stage, *Endgame* declares the end of the world as to a customs agent: object by measly object. As befits

a bomb shelter, there is mention of a “larder” in Clov’s kitchen. This space of reserve crucially changes the economy of scarcity and allotment in *Endgame*. Even if locked (only Hamm knows the combination), it suggests a potential “more.” The total exposure of the vagabonds’ condition in *Godot* depends on the absence of any reserve off stage, any place for potential stockpiles. Their only larder is in their pockets.

## Naming Godot

The Sontag and Chan productions of *Godot* share the common political ambition of publicizing the vulnerability of the cities of Sarajevo and New Orleans. This project becomes visible if we compare the titles of Sontag’s essay (“Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo”) and the book Chan edits (*Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*). These titles lack an indication that a play is being staged. Instead, the titles emphasize the waiting and suggest that these cities are places in which Godot is awaited. Both Sontag and Chan underscore what I describe in chapter 1 as utilitarian waiting. This type of waiting focuses on the “for” in waiting for someone or something and thereby assigns a clear endpoint to the waiting process. The waiting inscribed in the play is different because, although Godot is putatively the objective, the characters in fact have little expectation or hope that he will ever arrive and waiting itself—and the character of waiting, rather than waiting for Godot—takes precedence. The waiting of Vladimir and Estragon only resembles waiting for a bus if that bus is being anticipated in Sarajevo or the Lower Ninth Ward.

The Sarajevo and New Orleans productions are political because they encourage a figuration for Godot and the waiting process in the play. Both productions serially inscribe objects, authorities, and institutions in the blank space of “Godot.” Though Beckett’s play wages war on this “for,” both Sontag and Chan calibrate the need afflicting their cities by suggesting a number of possible Godots. Chan remarks, “In New Orleans in 2007, Godot is legion.”<sup>144</sup> Sontag speaks of “waiting for Clinton” and waiting for props: “‘You’ll definitely have the cigarette holder tomorrow,’ I was told every morning for three weeks.”<sup>145</sup> True to his grassroots approach, Chan distributes a questionnaire to the residents of Gentilly, a Gallup poll of need asking, “WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” The answers enumerate familiar failures: “FEMA,” “Waiting for the Tzar, Blakely, to do something,” “Waiting for the Road Home people to give me my money. It’s been a long wait.”<sup>146</sup> Other responses reveal the surprising absences in post-Katrina

Gentilly: waiting for street signs; waiting for someone to get onto the people who are not back and make them clean up their properties; waiting for the shopping center to reopen; waiting for more police, not military police: we need community-oriented people patrolling our neighborhood; waiting for a plan; waiting on money.<sup>147</sup>

Chan's question furnishes the residents' answers with a structure: "I am waiting for . . ." This is a leading question: it leads to all of Godot's namesakes. For this reason, very few answers respond to the question's implicit interrogation of the worth of the waiting process (i.e., *what good is waiting?*). Sylvester Desponza, resident of the St. Roch neighborhood before the storm, describes waiting as "waiting for the utilities to stop going on and off." Yet his other answers impulsively protest the structure of the question. Desponza writes, "Everything that has not happened is disgusting." The "not happening" in the play itself, but without any reference to a Godot, is disgusting. "I am not waiting," Desponza says, "but puking."<sup>148</sup> He fashions a truly provisional response to Beckett's drama: he does not need a Godot, he needs a Dramamine.

Responses to the Chan survey draw our attention away from hypothetical cures to the visible dislocation of post-Katrina New Orleans.<sup>149</sup> Desponza's comments have an urgency not seen elsewhere in the questionnaire: "Go to the 2900 and 3000 block in St. Roch and see how empty it is—the conditions are still the same."<sup>150</sup> Instead of an answer, Desponza offers an injunction outside the political compass set by Chan's poll. Desponza is saying enough with this Christmas list; "go see St. Roch for yourself, without the actors and risers." He senses that the arrival of these objects, people, and policies, each a Godot we await, would only be the start, not the end, of what the flood survivor needs. Maurice Blanchot writes, "When [literature] names something, whatever it designates is abolished; but whatever is abolished is also sustained, and the thing has found a refuge (in the being which is the word) rather than a threat."<sup>151</sup> Desponza suggests that listing and naming what the residents of Gentilly want (awarding them the title of *Godot*) only destroys that thing as an option. The title of Godot is not a threat but a refuge, because these things only remain true to Beckett's play by staying absent. Desponza suggests that the panoply of existing options should not provide us with our only possibility.<sup>152</sup>

Sontag and Chan articulate the political message of their productions through the figure in absentia. Though they stage a play about vagabonds, Sontag and Chan are interested less in a state of abandonment per se than in the figures by whom the characters (and the audience) have been abandoned. This message is curative and optimistic and conforms to the existing

political structure far more than does Desponza's despondent rage. Naming Godot allows Sontag and Chan to orchestrate vectors of need, desire, and absence around a more possible, more earthbound figure. They wrestle with the figure of Godot as with a weather vane they redirect so that it points no longer at the theater (to some figure waiting in the wings) but out to our world.

Since the no-man's-land has been removed from quotation marks, how will we do the same to "Godot"? This is the real question asked by both Sontag and Chan. Can Godot's prestigious stage absence be mobilized to coerce a political figure or agency from the shadows? The play itself instigates this sudden incarnation of its title, as Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly mistake Pozzo for Godot. It schools us in the ease, but also the error, with which Godot is recognized. Characters in the play are dubbed Godot, not officially as by the queen, but painfully as in a desynchronized kung fu film where sound (the name) poorly matches the image (the body). Absurdity and amusement abound in the effort to grapple with the potential of the name "Godot," to bestow the proper name for something that never arrives or that may have always been there. The audience tends to remember Godot's absence rather than the vagabonds' need for him. This allows them to maintain the comic value of this no-show rather than the arduous poverty it entails. The casting call for a Wall Street production of *Godot* I discuss in the conclusion receives many replies. One is from a wag claiming he wants to play Godot. I wrote back: "Sure, but only if you have the wardrobe." Our joking hides what we do not know about waiting.

This reconsignment of Godot's name allows Chan to integrate his production into the local political landscape. *Waiting for Guffman* is a popular reworking of *Godot*. In the film, an amateur theater group tries to get its shot at the big time by inviting an established drama critic, Guffman, to their performance. They are confident that Guffman's critical approval will change their summer-stock status. They reserve a seat for the esteemed critic in the front row. The seat remains empty throughout the play until an individual walks in and takes the seat midway through the performance. Figuring their Godot has arrived, the actors are palpably excited until they realize after the performance that this audience member is not Guffman. Instead, the spectator is merely a passerby who enters the theater to get a balloon for his child. The man is a kind of Mr. Godin or Godet—as Pozzo twice mistakenly names Godot. The film turns the topos of Beckett's play inside out, as it is the stage actors (rather than the characters) who are waiting, and they wait alone, unaccompanied by the audience. Throughout the performance, the players' eyes can only look askance at the empty seat.

The emptiness of the seat facing the stage goes unnoticed by the audience, which is unaware that this drama of waiting is the real drama beneath the one they see on stage.

The performances of *Godot* in the settings of New Orleans and Sarajevo allocate not only the actors and the characters in the play but also political powers that be. Their presence or absence from the city is exemplified by their presence or absence from the production itself. In Chan's performance, this is highlighted by the drama surrounding the invitation of Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans, for whom a seat has been reserved. The densely packed audience in the Lower Ninth Ward calls attention to the emptiness of his seat, which remains starkly empty throughout the first half of the play. Here Chan taps into the Guffman scenario. Unlike *Godot*, *Guffman* suggests that intervention will not come from the stage but from the stands and the area around the stage. Nagin never does arrive, possibly because he was informed that he would not be allowed to make a speech.<sup>153</sup> Chan assigns Nagin a seat in the audience rather than a spotlight on the stage. Forced to be more a Guffman than a Godot, and unwilling to watch the play in solidarity with the audience, or to become a witness to the city, Nagin opts not to come. Chan sets up a seat for him as critical spectator whose response, like Guffman's, may have intervened to change the state of the actors at the corner of Prieur and Reynes.

## Performance Context as Inscribed within *Godot*

Every performance of *Waiting for Godot* abuts its environment in a highly idiosyncratic way. *Godot* asks where an event that does not take place is supposed to take place. The play is not content with displaying a missed encounter for us. Instead, it pulls the audience in by actively subtracting from the stage. As they try to recall where Godot said to meet them, Vladimir and Estragon throw the time and place of the stage they occupy into an acid bath of doubt: Is this the tree? Is it today? Where were we yesterday? When Vladimir declares that Godot says to wait on Saturday ("I think"), Estragon replies, "But what Saturday? And is it Saturday?"<sup>154</sup> Vladimir can't remember whether he wrote it down somewhere and looks for it in his pants and coat, "bursting with miscellaneous rubbish."<sup>155</sup> For a brief instance the content of the play, and our encounter with it, rests upon the archival power of a hobo's pocket. The play does not give us a no-man's-land so much as the wrong no-man's-land. In this way Beckett scours away at our own appointment with the theater and dethrones the stage as a site

of expected dramatic encounter. *Godot* offers a theater as rendezvous in the wrong place, kept at one end, by one party only.

Beckett's play delegitimizes its own space in that whatever happens goes on in default of the anticipated meeting with the title character, Godot. Emerging out of the happenstance gathering of vagabonds and spectators, and within a wholly provisional space, *Godot* assimilates itself to the conditions of theater under war or within a landscape of aftermath. After Vladimir is unable to locate Godot's card in his pocket, Beckett's stage directions inform us that Vladimir is to be "*looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape.*"<sup>156</sup> Sarajevo and New Orleans become landscapes into which the date for this appointment has been written, but illegibly, by the disasters of war and flood.

The rapport between stage and off stage is the very topic of Chan's and Sontag's plays. The dialogue envelops the surrounding space in its devastation. Vladimir and Estragon periodically name the horizon by pointing toward the audience and the wings. Discussing with Estragon whether the place looks familiar, Vladimir says, "All the same. . . that tree . . . (*turning towards the auditorium*) that bog. . . ." <sup>157</sup> Later when Vladimir asks, "Do you not recognize the place?" Estragon replies, "*(suddenly furious)* Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! (*Looking wildly about him.*) Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!"<sup>158</sup> Beckett gets rid of what Estragon calls scenery, settings designed for consumption, in favor of the muckheap. The theater projects a hypothetical disaster area. The characters' turns toward the audience are closer to surveying land than traditional asides. Instead of providing the characters' inner thoughts, these moments merge the spectators into the unrecognizable landscape. The characters absent us from their address, as if the "house," our space as designated in theater parlance, had been abandoned.

## Localization and Performance Context

How do performances treat the desolation of Beckett's stage? How much concrete detail does a stage provide—or withhold—in rendering a work that aspires to be nondescript? *Localization* refers to the way directors use the stage to create a specific social or political context for a play. JoAnne Akalaitis's *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater, for example, turns the stage into a blasted-out subway tunnel, replete with life-sized subway cars, a charred corpse, and Philip Glass's synthesized music. Akalaitis's

stage establishes the aftermath setting of Beckett's play with sensational clarity.<sup>159</sup> By contrast, Beckett's scenario suggests the apocalypse that has transpired has taken all evidence of the event with it.<sup>160</sup> Likewise, the production history of *Waiting for Godot* is punctuated by efforts to bring its potential meanings into definite focus. Ilan Ronen, for example, situates the play within the Israel-Palestine conflict by casting Arab actors as Vladimir and Estragon (speaking Arabic) and Israeli actors as Pozzo and Lucky (speaking Hebrew).<sup>161</sup> Other directors supply greater historical definition to the gray backdrop of *Godot*. In his 1991 production in Nanterre, Joel Jouanneau populates the stage with the ruins of an abandoned electrical plant, morphing Vladimir and Estragon into urban street trash. Pozzo and Lucky are cast as a "cynical bourgeois exploiter" and immigrant laborer, a precursor to the *sans-papiers*.<sup>162</sup> Bradby remarks that the director "did not want to show a generalized picture of humanity, but to give his characters clearly localized, specific qualities: 'restituer l'image de la dérive d'êtres exclus dans la France des années 90.'" <sup>163</sup>

Localization is a powerful way for a director to develop meaning, but this comes at a cost. Fully mobilizing the décor to contextualize Beckett's play in a particular place and within a particular debate, these directors turn Beckett's exposed stage into *exposé*. The difference between these like-sounding terms becomes apparent in Jouanneau's statement about his intention to "restore the image of drifters, of people excluded from the France of the 1990s." Jouanneau seizes Vladimir and Estragon as an opportunity to both create and renew that image of excluded people and thereby recall them to political discussion. In exposing the vagabonds to the elements, to view, and to an unknown trajectory, Beckett's play impoverishes their image. Photographically speaking, Beckett simultaneously underdevelops and overexposes the image of the vagabonds.

Savaging the idea that theater is a place for types (the armature of literature as sociology), Beckett withdraws his couple from culture's repertoire of images (including that of "couple"). The play joins in with the termite activity that Vladimir and Estragon perform on the set itself, as their dialogue eats away at the sorry image of the tree before our eyes. Where Beckett wants to subtract fantasy, these directors want to add it. This fantasy invested into Beckett's work goes by the name of infidelity. Bradby makes infidelity a condition of making *Godot* politically resonant: "To give the play a specific political meaning, it is necessary to alter it, however subtly."<sup>164</sup> Akalaitis, Ronen, and Jouanneau must stray from their relation to Beckett's work in order to have it articulate the desired network of references.

Sontag's and Chan's productions break with the notion of context as enforced by the localization of a play. They submit *Godot* to a *condition* of war and flood rather than a fabricated context. This condition exerts pressure on the very process of the play's production, affecting the actors and not just the characters, the play's process and not just its effect. Representation, staging, and the whole parade of mimetic questions that a director considers are obviated by the setting given by the crisis itself and overwhelm them. The ground for performance is a space unresolved and in the lurch, like the audience itself. The disaster environment, spectacularly confined to the stage in Akalaitis's production of *Endgame*, spills in all directions from the stages in New Orleans and Sarajevo. War and flood produce the lifeless décor for a Beckett play exceeding the space of the stage. In light of a landscape fraught with suitably desolate stages, the choice of performance space in Sarajevo or New Orleans has a provisional and arbitrary quality. Where the proscenium arch conveniently contains Akalaitis's aftermath, Sontag's performance space cannot adequately withstand the siege of the context, cannot ensure that the theater will hold out if an adjacent building is struck with mortar fire. In this way the war provides conditions to the play, as for terms of surrender. Sontag notes how *Godot* involuntarily registers the situation outside the theater because the play's protracted silences are no longer silences: "The only sounds were those coming from outside the theatre: a UN armored personnel carrier thundering down the street and the crack of sniper fire."<sup>165</sup> Something similar takes place in the Lower Ninth Ward, as the locale becomes part of the performance by necessity rather than design. Anne Gisleson describes how the staged silence invites context: "The soundscape was just as integral: distant police sirens, tugboat and train horns, the sharply wailing birds, all pulsing quietly in the background, muted by the once-treacherous canal and the empty lots of former homes."<sup>166</sup> These performances absorb the environment beyond space of audience and stage, not like a sponge but like a concussion.

Alterations to the actors' roles and even to the text of the play itself function differently in crisis environments. Chan's production at Gentilly, for example, transpires in front of an abandoned house, a placeholder for the many others in the area. During the performance, Vladimir spray-paints "Godot" onto this house. It is unclear whether by this gesture he is vandalizing a set, tagging, or contributing to the rest of the graffiti in post-Katrina New Orleans. (This ambiguity would not characterize the identical gesture performed on a conventional stage.) The defacement channels broader questions: is he defacing a prop, and if so, has the whole of Gentilly become a collection of props? After the flood, many abandoned buildings become

archives of acerbic commentary: "AS NOT SEEN ON TV," for example.<sup>167</sup> These painted barbs compete with the fluorescent orange markings of official search parties, which designate inspected buildings or those with bodies found inside. As writing on the wall, Godot is cosigned: within Beckett's play, the name functions as a protest for the endpoint of the waiting process, but also as shorthand for the futility and deathly absence at the heart of the waiting process.

Chan also contextualizes the waiting of Beckett's characters through popular culture. Vladimir and Estragon wile away their time through impersonations: a Louis Armstrong impression, Michael Jackson's moonwalk. These citations of African American performance markedly contrast with the countercelebrity status of the black homeless characters we are watching on stage. What is their poverty (and their performance) to the immediately recognizable figures they cite with their voices and bodies? Does pop culture distract the African American community from their aftermath condition? What dream or escape from the conditions of Beckett's poverty is enlisted by imitating a performer rather than performing the long wait?

## Parable and Asymptote

Critical response frequently regards Sontag's and Chan's productions as variations on the theme of localization, as if the disaster areas of Sarajevo and New Orleans were no different from the one Akalaitis constructs on the stage of the American Repertory Theater. Though offering her guarded approval, Oppenheim, for example, faults Sontag for diminishing Beckett's vision: "While the primitive, brutal even, dimensions and the alienation, illusion, hope and despair that characterize the work are without a doubt relevant to the Bosnians' situation, the parabolic vision of the play is clearly diminished both by its localization within a highly charged political arena and the substitution of a collectivity for a single couple."<sup>168</sup> On the one hand, Oppenheim concedes how the Sarajevans respond to the "primitive" quality of Beckett's work. This brute uptake, however, contaminates the dimension of Beckett's work that holds itself in reserve and outside application to the world: its status as parable. Oppenheim constructs an opposition between the supposed immediacy of Beckett as depiction versus a more reflective and meditative mode of signification.<sup>169</sup>

Yet in what ways does *Godot* exhibit a "parabolic vision"? Parable gives us the fruit of learning without its painful acquisition process. *Godot* offers

us no such leverage, no outcome of the learning experience. On Beckett's stage, bodies monstrate rather than demonstrate principles for the spectator. A character cannot be a mouthpiece when his mouth is crammed with his last carrot. These qualities make it difficult for us to take the first step in receiving *Godot* as parable: we do not *disembody* Vladimir and Estragon. Their stage presence evinces the dolor and sluggishness one imagines Aesop's animals might have when not talking or when not in the limelight of parable.

Oppenheim clearly mistakes the loss of qualities in the vagabonds for the advent of some general condition or concept. The parable remains a genre indebted to the humanist tradition, and existentialism has seized the nakedness of Beckett's characters as an opportunity to discuss "humanity" on his stage. Adorno succinctly warns against this move in his notes to Beckett's *Endgame*: "Subtraction, not abstraction."<sup>170</sup> That is, Beckett does not wear down action, ego, stage, and tree in order to filter out everything unnecessary, leaving only a concept in its wake.<sup>171</sup> Subtraction cannot be equated with a refinement into concepts. Beckett's technique does not follow the path of Husserl's phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, bracketing whatever does not contribute to a study of the essential.<sup>172</sup> The last words of *Endgame*, "You, old stancher, you remain," indicate the play's survivor to be the half-bloodied cloth with which Hamm cloaks his face. Beckett's work seems to retain only inessential and downtrodden elements, obtuse forms that cannot be subsumed under rational concepts. The inexplicable residues derail the parabolic function and should not be confused with exemplary monuments.

To recover the truth of Oppenheim's critique of Sontag, we need to turn her image of Beckett's "parabolic vision" by ninety degrees, that is, her parabola must be made into an asymptote. Instead of parabolic vision, Beckett's work enacts a parabolic function. Etymologically, "asymptotic" derives from the term meaning "not to meet" (a mathematical synopsis for Beckett's play) and designates a curve that approaches zero without ever attaining zero.<sup>173</sup> Oppenheim notes that the parabolic vision is not lost but merely "diminished" when contextualized in Sarajevo. This reduction of meaning, of potential, complies with the asymptotic process in and around Beckett's play. The scantiness of means, the doing with less, the barely enough: these describe what Vladimir and Estragon are enduring as well as the actors who are rehearsing to play them.

Oppenheim claims that theater has no chance in "the highly charged political arena." She seems to say theater (high culture, refinement) does not belong in the arena of either politics or vulgar sport. Beckett does not

agree with this, as can be seen by the way he brings theater asymptotically to near zero, diminishing our expectations and subtracting from theater its pretensions, its ornamentation, its theatricality. In revising theater, Beckett's work emerges as a theatrical experiment that echoes the dismal political experiment going on in Sarajevo and New Orleans. This political experiment entails the revision of the institution of the arena: in New Orleans, the Superdome ceases to be the space where the Saints play and becomes a massive and enclosed holding center for citizens displaced by the storm. In Croatia, the stadium in Slavonski Brod functions as a holding area for civilian refugees and is a frequent target for Serb artillery. Beckett's revisionary theater emerges in settings where arenas are refunctioned as holding pens.

## Absurdity

Contrary to the tradition within literary criticism, Paul Chan suggests that *Godot* is not an example of the theater of the absurd, but rather a theater that responds to the absurdity of the world. The irrationality of the levee failure outbids the nonsensical banter between Vladimir and Estragon:

It didn't look like a play. . . . It looked more to me like the emphatic expression of a community trying to come to terms with the irreconcilability of it all. What happened, and what is still happening, makes no sense. This nonsense has its own reason. And this reason must not be the only one worth using to make sense of what is happening to us, around us, against us. *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* wanted to create another reason, to make another kind of sense, because art, if it is in fact art, is the reason that makes reason ridiculous.<sup>174</sup>

*Godot* offers another reason, the reasoning of art. The sense of art is not subsumable under the instrumental reason that is operative everywhere in society, from its machines, to its bureaucracy, to its levees, to its management and facilitation of disaster.<sup>175</sup> Art's poverty and impotence, the fact that it cannot enter the world and remains useless to it, is its utility. In remaining only in terrible symmetry with the world rather than dissolving into it, Beckett's play becomes a gym—one in which non-sense is exerted, exercised, and sweated, where one undertakes preparation for the "irreconcilability of it all," which is the irreconcilability between sense and the world, between people, between people and their situation, between need

and the measures taken to address it, between individuals and their own waiting.

The image made by *Godot* in Sarajevo and New Orleans differs starkly from images of the respective disasters disseminated through television and other media. Images from Sontag's and Chan's productions demand a new understanding of the situation on the ground in devastated cities and a new understanding of Beckett's play. Chan and Sontag are focused primarily on this first goal. They turn toward the seemingly anachronistic medium of the stage in order to offer an echo chamber for it rather than a reproduction of it. In the media-saturated landscape of Sarajevo, Sontag remarks, "Suffering is visibly present, and can be seen in close-up; and no doubt many people feel sympathy for the victims. What cannot be recorded is an absence—the absence of any political will to end the suffering."<sup>176</sup> Television saturates our vision with close-ups of the disaster, turning the absence of intervention into an image of interest.

Photographic documentary of the disaster equally falls under Sontag's indictment. Her observation supports Walter Benjamin's assertion that photography "makes poverty into an object of consumption."<sup>177</sup> Two well-known photographic studies of Katrina's aftermath, Robert Polidori's *After the Flood* and Chris Jordan's *In Katrina's Wake*, demonstrate Sontag's and Benjamin's points. The fascination of these images lies in the mixture of nausea and curiosity they inspire in their registration of landscapes disarmingly emptied of all people. The work of both photographers relishes the sheer mass (a better word might be *wealth*) of possessions disengorged from people's homes by the floodwaters. Polidori establishes the photographic idiom of this disaster in three phases: photos of homes' exteriors (watermarks near the roof; clear signs of abandonment); the mucked interiors of homes (furniture rearranged by the strong waters, lines indicating where the floodwaters rose up to a father's chin in the family portrait); and the survey of possessions strewn across the desolated landscape of New Orleans. Both Polidori and Jordan position us within the aftermath of the flood. Like Beckett, they even ask us to take stock of this disaster. Yet in these photographs this stocktaking is made literal while it becomes the mourning of lost property. Our eyes comb through the swath of possessions dispossessed of owners. Sadly, the name brand emerges here as a life raft for our perception. The "quirky" image of a refrigerator lodged up in a tree, a Hammond organ overturned in the water, the Barbie doll stuck in the mud, the purse and shoes forcibly wedged within the fence. The photographs hook our eye with these muddied and sullen commodities. The emotional effect of the photographs depends so forcibly on such merchan-

dise that we slowly realize we are auditing the images (as if we were representatives for an insurance company) much more than we are replying to the disaster they signify. In contrast to this decisive instant of recognition in the photograph, Beckett's theater suggests temporality (the long wait without promise of its end) and protracted misrecognition to be crucial parts of the disaster experience.

But Sontag's and Chan's productions not only raise our awareness about the war or the flood; they also help us understand the play itself. *Godot* in Sarajevo does not try to record the absence of an intervention by Clinton; *Godot* in New Orleans does not merely record the failures of FEMA or an inability to "make it right." Instead, the play registers the effects of this absence. The play is already a tightly wound articulation of this condition. But Sontag's and Chan's performances enact a subtraction process directed at the remnants allotted to the stage. From the destruction of Sarajevo that transpires in default of intervention, the media make images sufficient unto themselves. By means of vagabonds speaking in rage and irritability about the "enough," Beckett produces images insufficient unto themselves, which echo (rather than merely indict) the absence of Godot.

Beckett's vagabonds exist on the periphery of culture, yet suffer its blows and imperatives most directly. To audiences enduring the war or the aftermath of the flood, the performance of *Godot* illuminates the condition of abandonment overlooked by public officials and the news media: George Bush's "I'LL FIX IT" headlining the front page of the *New York Post* on September 3, 2005, or the moral imperative that serves as the title for Brad Pitt's neighborhood rehabilitation project, *Make It Right*. *Godot* dramatizes the "nothing to be done," the inertia of life cut off from the transformative rendezvous. The play remains responsive to the unfixable, incurable, irresolvable nature of catastrophe. The dislocated inhabitants of Sarajevo and New Orleans encounter this incapacity as the daily condition of their lives. To them, *Waiting for Godot* comes like a State of the Union address.